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the ACOUSTIC GUITAR podcast

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In the most recent episode of the Acoustic Guitar Podcast, **Kaki King** talks about developing new tunings, the story behind the passerelle bridge, and her non-standard creative process. Listen and subscribe at AcousticGuitar.com/podcast or wherever you get your podcasts!

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Fax: (510) 217-3522

Mail & Shipping:
330 Sir Francis Drake Blvd., Suite K
San Anselmo, CA 94960

Printed in USA

Except where otherwise noted, all contents © String Letter Publishing, Inc, Lyzy Lusterman, Publisher.

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THE FRONT PORCH

John Monteleone



ROD FRANKLIN

I am sometimes struck by the connections between players and luthiers in the acoustic guitar community, and when assembling this issue's contents I was reminded just how small this world is.

Take one of today's most celebrated jazz guitarists, Julian Lage, who talks in these pages about his latest Blue Note album and his propensity for small-bodied acoustics. Lage has been connected to the lutherie community ever since he was a child prodigy in the late 1990s, when guitar maker Linda Manzer sent him the archtop that would be his main instrument for many years. More recently, Lage was extensively involved in the design of not one but two Collings signature models: the steel-string acoustic OM1 JL and the hollowbody electric 470 JL.

In 2011, Lage helped premiere *Seasons: A Song Cycle for Guitar Quartet*, which guitarist-composer Anthony Wilson wrote for four instruments made by John Monteleone. Lage was recently interviewed for *The Chisels Are Calling*, a documentary portrait of the famed archtop luthier, profiled here in the Makers & Shakers department. Singer-songwriter Ben Harper also appears in the documentary, waxing rhapsodically about the Weissenborn-style archtop he commissioned from Monteleone, seen on the cover of the January/February 2021 issue. Another nonstandard creation, Monteleone's Rocket Convertible, from a collection of 21 blue-colored archtops that also includes instruments by Manzer and Collings, is featured in this issue's Great Acoustics column.

While Lage is perhaps first and foremost a jazz musician, he has also traveled in new acoustic music circles, playing on NPR's *Live From Here* with host and mandolinist-composer Chris Thile (who, along with banjoist Béla Fleck and others, appeared on Lage's 2009 debut album, *Sounding Point*). Thile first rose to prominence in the contemporary Americana trio Nickel Creek, with siblings Sean and Sara Watkins, who recently reunited and spoke to Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers at length about their writing process and their long history for the cover story, their first for *AG* since the December 2002 issue.

Chris Eldridge, Thile's bandmate in the bluegrass-inspired supergroup Punch Brothers, has several beautiful guitar duo albums with Lage, and I highly recommended you check out all of them. On this issue's Playlist selection, *I Am a Pilgrim: Doc Watson at 100*, Eldridge plays his arrangement of the murder ballad "Little Sadie" with some subtle reharmonizations, and yet another associate of Lage's, none other than Bill Frisell, offers a pensive solo guitar rendition of "Your Lone Journey," as well as a haunting treatment of "Handsome Molly" with singer-songwriter Valerie June on voice and banjo.

Going back to the original source, our regular Pickin' columnist, Alan Barnosky, has worked up a comprehensive lesson on the subtleties and complexities of Doc Watson's pioneering flatpicking approach, both in terms of accompaniment and soloing, as well as a general appreciation of the man and his music. We've also included a note-for-note transcription of Watson's impossibly fast fingerpicking showcase "Doc's Guitar," and, for good measure, "Shake Sugaree," a fingerstyle classic by another legendary folk guitarist from North Carolina, Elizabeth Cotten.

I hope that you will take as much inspiration as I do from tracing the relationships between these brilliant musicians and luthiers, as well as their great contributions to the acoustic guitar world.

—Adam Perlmutter
Adam.Perlmutter@Stringletter.com

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GUITAR TALK



JEFF FASANO

Different Kind of Groove

Singer-songwriter John Oates explores the music of Mississippi John Hurt

BY E.E. BRADMAN

John Oates will forever be best known as half of Hall & Oates, the top-selling musical duo of all time, who've been in the Songwriters Hall of Fame for 20 years and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame for nearly a decade. Since 2002, however, the Philadelphia-area native has carved a distinct identity as a proponent of classic Americana. His most recent releases—2011's *Mississippi Mile*, 2014's *Good Road to Follow*, 2018's *Arkansas*, and five live albums—feature his voice and acoustic guitar playing right up front, and his 2022 duo tour with guitar great Guthrie Trapp made it clear that moving to Nashville had only strengthened Oates' relationship to acoustic and classic songwriting.

Anyone surprised at Oates' turn from pop to Americana had perhaps missed the fact that before he had absorbed the R&B and soul that set the stage for Hall & Oates (as well as his recent soulful singles like "Pushin' a Rock" and a cover of Timmy Thomas' "Why Can't We Live Together"), Oates had paid close attention to his parents' big band and swing records, fell hard for doo-wop and early rock, and fully immersed himself in the '60s folk revival, which included being mentored by Philadelphia blues icon Jerry Ricks and learning "right from the source" by watching Mississippi John Hurt and Son House up close.

"I'm a better acoustic player than I am on electric," says the 75-year-old Oates. "My style is Chuck Berry meets Curtis Mayfield meets Doc Watson meets Mississippi John Hurt. I don't separate [blues, country, rock, and R&B] into genres—I call it all American roots music, because that's what it is. I see it all as a continuum."

What was the inspiration behind *Arkansas*?

I had originally planned to do a Mississippi John Hurt tribute record, because I know so many of his songs, in a very authentic way. I cut a couple of versions, just me and a guitar, but I had to ask myself, "Why am I doing this? It's never going to be as good as John Hurt." Then I realized that I'd never heard these songs performed with a band. So, I put together a band. I didn't want it to be a rock band, though.

Who'd you get?

Nathaniel Smith on cello, Sam Bush on mandolin, Russ Pahl on pedal steel, Guthrie Trapp on electric guitar, Steve Mackey on bass, and Josh Day on cajon and shaker. I played things exactly as John Hurt would have done, but when these musicians played around it, it turned into this magical thing. It sounded so good that I decided it would be a shame to just do Mississippi John Hurt songs.

How'd you decide the rest of the set list?

I began researching what he might have been listening to back in 1929 and 1930, when he was on OKeh Records. I got jukebox lists from all over the Deep South, and I was shocked at

the music that was being played on jukeboxes. There was cowboy music, ragtime, swing, some gutbucket local stuff—a real hodgepodge that I never expected. I found out that Mississippi John Hurt was a huge fan of Jimmie Rodgers, so I decided to do a Jimmie Rodgers song, too. The album became a snapshot of American popular music of the late '20s and '30s.

How did *Arkansas* change how you thought about American music?
I realized that the birth of American popular music coincides with the invention of the record player and radio. There was music in America before that, obviously, but the fastest way for it to spread was through radio and records. Although I made my reputation making pop music with Daryl Hall, I had no idea where it came from. That was a revelation to me. That's what *Arkansas* is about.

What attracted you to Hurt?
What appealed to me, which I didn't understand at the time, was that he didn't sound like a Delta blues player. He got his style from ragtime stride piano players, and once I understood that, I did a deep dive into ragtime and how he integrated that style into his playing, which helped me understand his music on a deeper level.

I know you own one of his guitars, and I've seen lists of your collection online. You also have a 1947 Gibson J-50 and a 1949 Martin 5-18, right?
Yes. The J-50 has the big baseball neck and it's not that comfortable in my hands, but it has a big sound. The 5-18 slot-head weighs nothing.

Do you still have your other Martins, like the 1983 D-28, the 00-15M, and the 00-28 custom?
Yep! I bought the D-28 for $150 backstage in the '80s. It was a 150th anniversary model, signed by C.F. Martin [both III and IV]. I've used it on a lot of things over the years. The 00-15M is mahogany, with a small body. And the 00-28 was the first guitar that I had made at the Martin Custom Shop. The body is also a half-inch thicker than a normal 00-28, so it's got more bottom end. It's a small-body guitar with a deep tone, and it has my *Good Road to Follow* logo. They're all great guitars.

How about the '67 Guild F-20?
That's the guitar I played on *Mississippi Mile*. It always sounded good and it had a character, so I ended up playing it on every track.

What a great collection. What other guitars stand out to you?
I have an L-00 made at the Gibson Custom Shop in Bozeman, Montana, by Ren Ferguson, who was their master luthier at the time. It's one of the last Gibsons he built, and it's a traditional Gibson-style sunburst, like the ones made in the early 1930s.

What gets the most playing time?
My Taylor GT guitars [conceived] by Andy Powers. I saw all these guys on YouTube raving about the GT, and I was like, "What's the big deal?" I went down to a guitar shop, picked one up, started playing it, and now I've got three of them—one in Europe, one in Colorado, and one here in Nashville. It's a small-bodied guitar with unique bracing, and it's short-scale, which suits my hands. I don't take my vintage instruments out on the road anymore, but if something happened to my Taylor, God forbid, I can get another one.

'Although I made my reputation making pop music with Daryl Hall, I had no idea where it came from.'
–JOHN OATES

What makes you want to hold on to an instrument?
If I don't play it, I probably don't keep it.

How do you amplify a guitar's natural tone when you're on tour?
I started out using super high-quality microphones by Ear Trumpet Labs, which a lot of bluegrass players use. They're great, but it takes a good PA system and a good soundperson to get it right. To make things easier, I went back to plugging in with the Fishman Loudbox Artist series, which I love. I use those amps like monitors; I have one next to me and one behind me. Taylor has their own proprietary pickups, the Expression System [2], which works well with the Loudbox amps. It's a great combination.

Are you using any effects?
I use the TC Electronic Infinite Loop for sustain. I can play a chord, sustain it, and then play over it. When I'm playing by myself, it gives me a spatial kind of sustain.

Do you use picks?
I'm either playing fingerstyle, with two fingers and a thumb, or with a Fred Kelly Bumblebee, which is a unique thumbpick. You can change the angle of the pick to your hand, and you can use it as a flatpick.

When you sit down to practice or warm up, what kind of stuff do you reach for?
The first thing I do is stretch my fingers because as I've gotten older, they're getting stiffer. I'll play bossa nova or some complicated chords that get my fingers moving in unusual ways. If I can't play some [Antônio Carlos] Jobim right away, I know I need to practice. If I play bossa nova and it's fluid, then everything else is easy.

What topics did you cover in your new instructional videos for Truefire?
I just finished them—they're being edited right now. I did three episodes: one on the history of American popular music, one on collaboration, and one about accompaniment, which I think is an untapped subject.

What about accompaniment fascinates you?
So many great guitar players know how to be accompanists, but a lot of guitar players just want to be able to riff, shred, and solo. There's a real discipline to being an accompanist. It's not easy to learn or be good at.

I've read that hearing great players in Nashville inspired you to practice harder. Did you feel like something in your songwriting needed to evolve, or was it on a purely technical level?
Well, country music is all about telling a concise story that's appealing but actually saying something. The lyricists I worked with in Nashville made me take a hard look at my lyrics, and my writing has improved because of that. Musically, I was a little too complicated, and it didn't serve the songs in any way. I'm learning to enjoy an elegant simplicity that transcends fads and styles.

What are your thoughts on the current state of pop songwriting?
Harmony has taken a back seat to groove and digital production, and artificial intelligence is just going to keep getting better. I'm not going to be around to see how it's all going to turn out, but while I'm still here, I'm waving the flag for organic, authentic songwriting and performing that uses harmony and chords. I'm an old-school musician, and I'm proud of it. **AG**

Forging *Ahead*

How Nickel Creek's Sean Watkins, Sara Watkins, and Chris Thile made their most ambitious album yet

By Jeffrey Pepper Rodgers

Not many bands can claim to have played together for well over 30 years—while its members are in their 40s.

Nickel Creek, formed back when Chris Thile and Sara Watkins were seven and Sean Watkins was 12, is a special case. Chris and Sara were still teenagers when the band released the seminal 2000 album *Nickel Creek,* produced by Alison Krauss, which merged the sounds of bluegrass and Celtic music with contemporary song craft and went platinum. In the decades since, the trio has taken extended breaks while all were busy with other projects—Chris with Punch Brothers and hosting the public radio show *Live From Here,* Sara and Sean with the Watkins Family Hour, Sara with I'm With Her, Sean with solo albums, and more. Every time Nickel Creek gets back together, though, they not only rekindle their connection but explore new territory. And that's certainly the case with their remarkable new album, *Celebrants,* released nine years after *A Dotted Line*.

Celebrants was very much shaped by the pandemic shutdown, both in its themes and in the way it was made. With touring on hold, the trio found extensive time to create together—Sean estimates 75 or 80 days of collective writing for the album, and then they had a month in Nashville's historic RCA Studio B to record with producer Eric Valentine. The result is an hourlong journey through 18 connected songs, each with intricate instrumental arrangements and layers of vocals. Though no other guest musicians appear alongside Chris (mandolin, mandola, bouzouki), Sara (fiddle, high-strung guitar), and Sean (standard and baritone guitars) aside from Mike Elizondo on bass, the soundscape they create is vast and incredibly dynamic—from hushed, hypnotic tracks like "Holding Pattern" to the blazing odd-meter instrumental "Going Out..." and the blues-rock blowout "Where the Long Line Leads."

On the verge of the album release, I spoke with the trio on Zoom from their respective homes in Southern California (Sara and Sean) and Brooklyn (Chris) to learn more about this new chapter in the Nickel Creek story. In addition, Sean explained the guitar craft behind some of the album's standout tracks—see lesson on page 21.

You all are involved in so many projects and bands. What does Nickel Creek draw out of you as players, writers, and singers that's special to this trio?

Sean: I mean, it's a unique thing to be in a band this long and still feel as challenged and excited about it as ever. Because we trust each other so much, when an idea is put forth that is outside my comfort zone, I tend to say, that's great—let's see this through and I'll learn.

Chris: For me, this band has a voice that is so distinct. It's like an existing palette of colors that we can rely on as creators for whatever we have to express. That was particularly useful for this project, where we got pretty ambitious and tackled a pretty big subject.

You know, we've been in this band now for 34 years, so the palette we're using is well defined. Though it's constantly evolving, it's evolving from a place that is very solid and dependable, and I think that's invaluable.



Sara Watkins, Chris Thile (standing), and Sean Watkins

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Sara: Right, there's the uniqueness of the foundation and the constant of the history, but in order for us to want to make an album, there has to be a reason. There has to be enough new that we're all bringing to the table, or enough new in life, that we are able to make music we haven't done yet.

This album feels really big to me—a lot of songs, a lot of ideas, so many layers, all sort of bursting out of the confines of conventional song form. What drove that ambition?

Chris: As Sara was saying, we wanted to get back together and make something, and we pointedly wanted it *not* to be like a class reunion—but rather like the class is coming back together for a major research project.

And so, we were on the phone talking about "OK, if we're going to do this, let's do something we haven't done, not just with each other but anywhere with anyone."

Sean: We all felt like this was an opportunity not to redefine ourselves, but to reframe. You know, we started talking about making this record, gosh, almost three years ago, and our last record came out in 2014. Especially with Covid, it felt like a slingshot had been pulled back, and the intention to create and do new things was made even stronger because of what we all had to live through. Everything happening at that time made us want to take a much bigger swing than we have in the past.

When I first I heard the lead track, "Celebrants," I felt like I was listening to the opening number of a musical, introducing the themes and the cast. Does this music feel theatrical in that way to you?

Chris: Totally. You're always drawing on other mediums for inspiration, of course, and we have talked a lot about narrative. It's still abstract narrative—it doesn't tell a point-A-to-point-B kind of a story necessarily. It's more vignettes, but they are all pointing at the same topic or a very related core of topics—an arc. It's a meditation on togetherness, and it does have a beginning, middle, and end, despite the fact that it's not told sequentially or definitively.

Also a thing we talked about is this collective feeling that music is better at asking questions than providing answers, and that the art we gravitate towards provides the listener with a springboard to go explore themselves as opposed to being a slideshow of where we've been exploring. It's like an arrow pointing off into the woods: like, hey, we think there's some cool stuff this direction, maybe you should come check it out.

Sara: I agree. We've been thinking about curiosity and how a lot of times that's the way to find hope, when you're in a very pessimistic society and not necessarily sure of what to be hopeful about. Especially among our peers and our age group, there's a real tendency to say the world is screwed and everything is bad except for me and my friends—we've got it all figured out.

The thing that I hope people get out of these songs is a sense of that curiosity that we strive for. A lot of the songs were brought by genuine conversations of catching up and wondering about each other, and ideally, art makes people curious.

Did you avoid working on songs individually beforehand so you could really start from scratch?

Sean: Yeah. One way that we've done it a lot the past is that we all show up with songs that are mostly done and the other two add to it what they can. In that case, I love the analogy Sara uses: one person's fingerprints are all over it, and then there are some spare fingerprints from the other two.

With this album, we wanted everyone's fingerprints to be on everything as much as possible—also extending to Mike Elizondo, who played bass on the album. We left a lot unfinished because we wanted his fingerprints on it as well, which proved to be crucial. He's such a badass and a hero of ours, and he really helped shape the songs in a special way.

Chris: When you write a long-form composition, you have to be really comfortable with all the balls being in the air for a long, long time. A record like this, or a long piece like this, is like a tent; the thing doesn't look like it would do anything for you until all of a sudden it's a whole tent.

That [type of writing] doesn't get done collaboratively a lot because it's nerve-wracking to be in a room with musicians you really respect with a bunch of unfinished stuff lying around. It's hard to share that vision of the completed project. It's still a raggedy canvas tent lying on the forest floor, and you're going, "No, no, you'll see, it's like a dome, and you're gonna be able to be in there and it's waterproof! You're gonna love it!"

Sara: To do it as a group, you need to have a certain amount of time together. We had the luxury of two weeks living together and then the following two weeks living very close together and spending all day together. We were able to have united focus for that amount of time. So we were able to remember everything we were working on and all the hypotheticals and the like, "Oh, but remember this other section that was going to go there?" It's all invisible and just in your audio memory or whatever outline you've written in your head, so it behooves you to do it quite quickly or in a dense period of time if you're doing it as a group.

Chris: And then, of course, you dream something so much crazier when you have the strength of three imaginations instead of one, as long as you trust and respect each other. As someone who's sitting around in his room making stuff all the time, it's just so fun to see what happens when you open yourself up to the visions of others around you.

To get a bit more of a sense of the process, let's drill down into a few specific songs. First, "Strangers." What do you remember about how that started or grew?

Chris: It's the oldest piece of music on the record. Sean brought it to us like five years ago.

Sean: We were going to try to write a new Nickel Creek song for *Live From Here*. That was one idea that got thrown around but never developed. We ended up doing a different song. But it was saved in a Dropbox folder or something called Nickel Creek ideas.

That one had a real small germ. I love Lindsey Buckingham's fingerstyle stuff where he's really aggressive and does things in an unconventional way, like in "Never Going Back Again." I was thinking about him when I was playing that fingerpicking part.

Chris: And you had the melody [*sings*]. Sara and I came up with the echo, so that was the kernel: that driving but hypnotic fingerstyle thing and a call and response. And then it went from there. That song also might have had the most arduous composition experience. We had some very fully developed false starts. False starts that got all the way to the end.

Sara: Like the middle section, that instrumental.

Chris: It was a real problem child. But we were all so attached to the idea and really believed in it. Had we not, I think the whole thing would have ended up as scraps on the floor. We kept pressing on, and it went through a lot of versions. It was as long as six minutes at one time.

Sean: It went through like four different demo versions, and there was maybe a month before we recorded what is now the chorus.

Chris: Yeah, that's what showed up right at the very end of the process. But you know, that first mover, the guitar figure with the call and response thing, is what suggested the lyrical material. That provided the north star for the song.

How about "Holding Pattern"? I gather that started from Sean's little circular fingerpicking part.

Sara: I remember being in the house and Sean played this demo of the two guitar parts together [regular guitar and high-strung], which is unchanged. That was the foundation from the beginning. There was a verse melody and the chorus melody, though different lengths.

'With this album, we wanted everyone's fingerprints to be on everything as much as possible.' —Sean Watkins

Sean: I had verses, but they got changed—thankfully. The original verses were so weak compared to what they ended up being, and it really points to the power of the band and trusting each other. I remember it was early on in the process, maybe the first couple of days when we were looking through our notes or voice memos and just being like, is this a thing? And that was one I'd forgotten about and found, and I remember Chris was like, "That's cool. What if I sing it and I have an idea for a different verse melody?"

Chris: That was almost the opposite of "Strangers" in terms of the form, and everything almost came down in real time. When you played that demo it was like, "It goes like *this*."

Sara: The snaps [finger snaps on the backbeats] were part of it from the get-go.

Sean: Conceptually, we wanted the holding pattern vibe to be there, and part of that was, "This is going to be a very circular song that doesn't take you into any new keys." So we had that as a map.

Chris: Yeah, that's one where the content dictated form. That's a Stephen Sondheim thing: Content has to dictate form, or else it just starts to smack of insincerity—or you are being contrived or forcing a square peg into a round hole.

Sean had that holding pattern idea, and that suggested those crazy routines we all got into during the early stages of lockdown, where we wore holes in our floors and were existing with the people that we share space with in such an intense way. That became the springboard lyrically.

Tell me about "Where the Long Line Leads," which has such an explosive sound and vocal from Sara. It has a blues-rock feel but not a typical blues chord progression.

Chris: I wanted us to have a rager. You know, there are a couple ragers on the record, which is fun. I played the little germ of an idea [on mandolin] for Sara and Sean, and Sara was like, "Hey, can I sing that one?" And we went from there.

Sara: One of the things I love the most is that in order for me to sing it, it had to be in a different key. It just happened to work out perfectly for the mandola [tuned a fifth lower than the mandolin]. We haven't had that kind of a song on mandola yet, and I feel like it really puts it in a different and heavier place for us.

Chris: I hadn't thought about that, almost like the way metal bands tune down.

Sara: It's our version of tuning the guitar down to C.

So as you worked on these songs, were you charting anything out or just doing it by ear?

Sara: There were a lot of voice memos going on. And we shared digital lyric notes. We've never employed that kind of technology before, where we were able to see everything in one place and to try out ideas on each other in real time.

Sean: I remember like a week into [the writing process], we were staying at a friend's house in Santa Barbara and we were all in different rooms. We'd been working and talking about lyrics, and when we'd go to sleep, I'd get a notification on my phone that the notes have changed. I open it up, and I can see Chris write in real time—type a word, erase it, then it comes back, erase. It was so fun to watch the process and the living document.

Sara: We all took personal notes. I actually think in outline form, so a lot of times I'll just have very sparse notes that help me keep the song straight when a lot of things are changing. As Chris said, you have to be willing to have everything in mush state for a very long time. And so for me, it's helpful to be like, "Oh, this is where we left this last time: We crossed off this whole section, and then this part went up here."

Chris: Nothing made it into notation, despite that there's some stuff that definitely could have.

Sean: I charted out stuff at times, especially when we got into the studio to take a practice swing with our producer, Eric Valentine, which is what he likes to do. We did that on *Why Should the Fire Die?* as well, where we recorded the whole thing, real rough sketches, just so we could look at the structure and see what it was.

Chris: Does it look like a tent?

Sara: Put the pole higher!

Thinking back on your history, how would you draw the line between what you played as kids—bluegrass and cowboy songs and all—to this music? What's the throughline?

Sara: It's funny you mentioned the cowboy songs, because there's a moment in "The Meadow" where there's this bent harmony [dipping down a half step and back up]. And we're totally referencing Sons of the Pioneers.

Sean: In "Strangers," too, the harmony.

Sara: Yeah, there's this lilt that really feels like the stuff we heard from those cowboy singers we grew up hearing at the Western Music Association meetings of Old Tucson.

Sean: I also think that the throughline, to be more zoomed out, is the joy that we've always felt, and the curiosity about what a song could be. It feels the same to me, that joy and fun, even though the music sounds totally different.

Chris: When I listen to something like our first record on Sugar Hill, that's the thing: As different as that stuff sounds when you compare it directly with *Celebrants,* what strikes me as being very similar is that it's joyful, no matter how dark the topic is. There's something about doing this in each other's company that keeps it suspended somehow and optimistic. Not in a Pollyanna way, but in a "beautiful to be alive and to be able to make music together" way.

Sara: I think that it *was* sort of Pollyanna at first, like the first album, because we were super naive and we were kids. What's interesting to me is that this album is about choosing to return to people, to sort through the mess and to find the beautiful and remember and celebrate. Now it might take a little bit of effort or deliberate intent, but in this band that does come more naturally.

Chris You know, there are myriad ways in which human beings suck and we've made it so hard for each other, but also myriad ways in which we're the best. As long as we're still here and we're trying, then there's hope. And I feel like that's a defining characteristic of Nickel Creek's sound. AG



JOSH GOLEMAN

WHAT SEAN WATKINS PLAYS

Watkins' main guitar on *Celebrants* is a 1949 Gibson LG-2 that was a gift from Jackson Browne. "I love it so much," he says. "It's just so warm and round from the low notes to the high notes, and it plays really well with Chris' Loar [Gibson mandolin] on this album."

Other core acoustics in his collection include his Bourgeois signature model, a Brazilian rosewood cutaway OM; a slope-shoulder Bourgeois dreadnought that he uses for low tunings; and a rubber bridge baritone from Old Style Guitar Shop in Los Angeles.

Watkins prefers D'Addario strings, typically nickel bronze .013s. "They sound great," he says. "They don't start off bright and then get dead. They start out medium and stay there, which I love." His go-to flatpicks include the BlueChip TAD60, Wegen 1.2 mm, and D'Addario Chris Thile signature Casein.

For amplification, Watkins uses an L.R. Baggs Lyric internal mic plus an Audio-Technica lavalier mic that clips into the soundhole. Both run through a Grace Felix preamp/DI. —*JPR*

A Lesson with Sean Watkins

The Nickel Creek guitarist shares the carefully crafted parts behind some of the band's new songs

BY JEFFREY PEPPER RODGERS

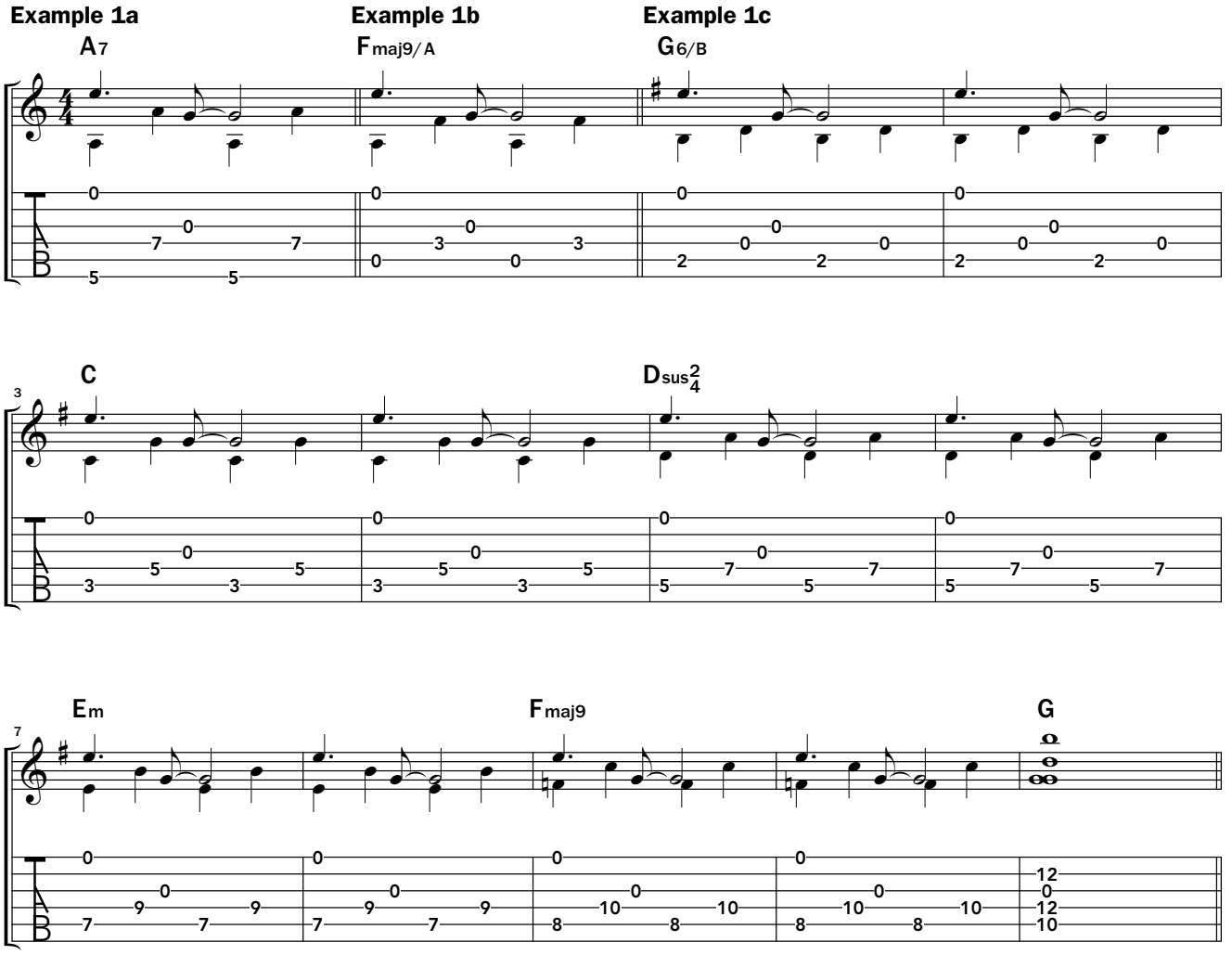
As Nickel Creek has ventured far from its bluegrass roots, Sean Watkins has developed a guitar vocabulary quite different from the classic boom-chuck, often employing partial chords, open voicings, hybrid picking, and other techniques. To shed light on his approach, I asked him about several standout tracks from *Celebrants*.

The first set of examples is based on "Strangers." Capo at the second fret, and either use hybrid picking, as he does, or play fingerstyle. Nickel Creek arrangements frequently call for switching between individual notes and strumming, so hybrid picking eases the transitions.

Start with the A7 in **Example 1a,** which is like a fifth-position A with the top three strings left open. Play the down-stemmed notes with the pick/thumb and the up-stemmed notes with your fingers. In the verse, he dips down to Fmaj9/A (**Example 1b**) and back up to A7. Then go to the Fmaj9/A again and follow with the sequence in **Example 1c,** eventually moving up the neck to the tenth fret. Every one of these chords includes the open third string, creating a drone that holds the whole pattern together.

The next example is based on "Holding Pattern." True to its name, the song is built on a fingerpicking part on one chord that never changes. The album track has two interlocking parts: one is capo 2, as shown in **Example 2**; the other is capo 7 on a Nashville high-strung guitar. This song is a rare case of Watkins playing straight fingerstyle, with no pick.

Example 3 is a small piece of the rhythm part from "Going Out . . . ," an instrumental inspired by Swedish folk groups like Väsen. The meter here is in seven, and Watkins adds chiming chords below what he called the "crazy angular melody" on mandolin and fiddle. He uses suspended chords like the Asus2 in many songs. "They're just different colors from the typical chord," he says, "and adding a ninth without a seventh makes it sound less jazzy and more open."




JOSH GOLEMAN

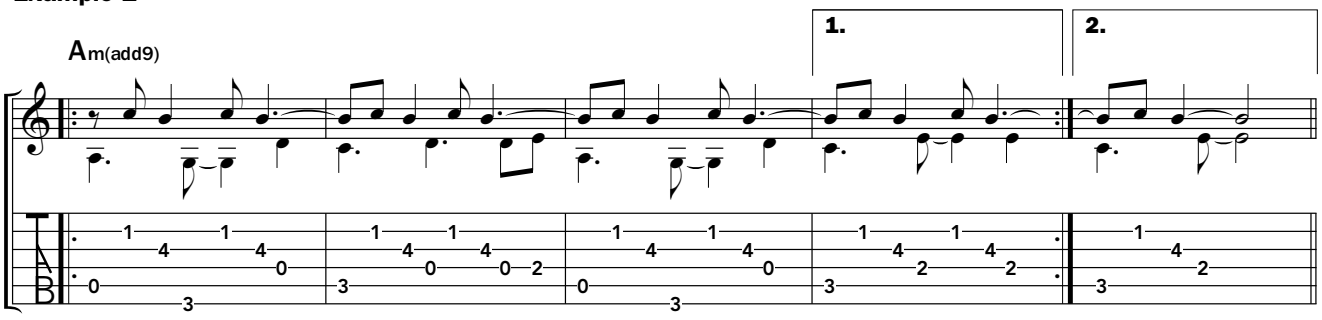
In a very different vein, **Example 4** is based on the minimalist, percussive accompaniment for "Stone's Throw." "I like messing around with playing two notes on the guitar, and then singing the third note of what would be the chord," Watkins says. "Incidentally, I started that [pattern] thinking about the Radiohead song 'Kid A,' and then it morphed into something else."

As in many Nickel Creek songs, "Stone's Throw" breaks from this stripped-down part into full, loud strumming and back again. "We're conscious about letting songs grow and evolve and not staying for too long in one mode," Watkins says. "If something happens in one chorus, we want the next chorus to be a little different. Maybe that means getting louder. Maybe that means adding a new part or a new instrument comes in." In many of the album's big moments, Watkins overdubbed a baritone guitar to add heft.

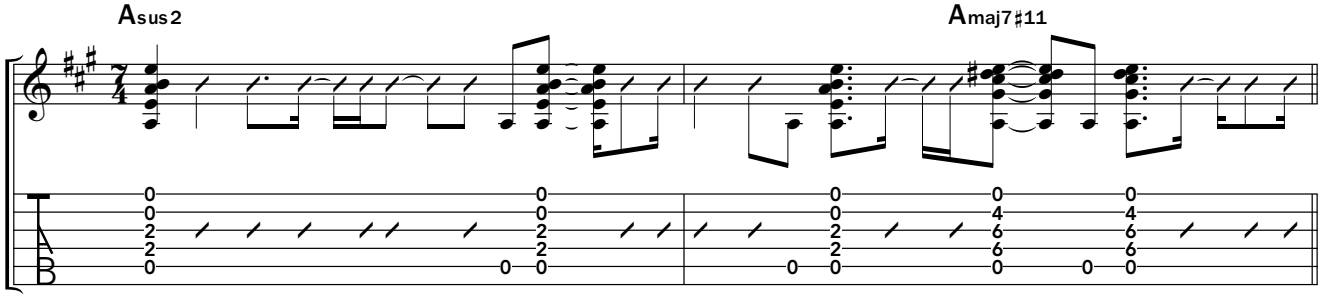
One of the album's most intense tracks is "Where the Long Line Leads." "It's meant to be a cross between something like an old bluegrass tune and garage punk," Watkins says. In **Example 5,** based on the beginning of the verse, let the top strings ring as you switch from E5 to E7sus4, Cmaj7, and E.

In Nickel Creek arrangements, every instrument has a very clear role, and every detail is carefully crafted. "I mean, on this album, there's no chord voicing that wasn't 100 percent deliberate," Watkins explains. "It was all worked out." AG

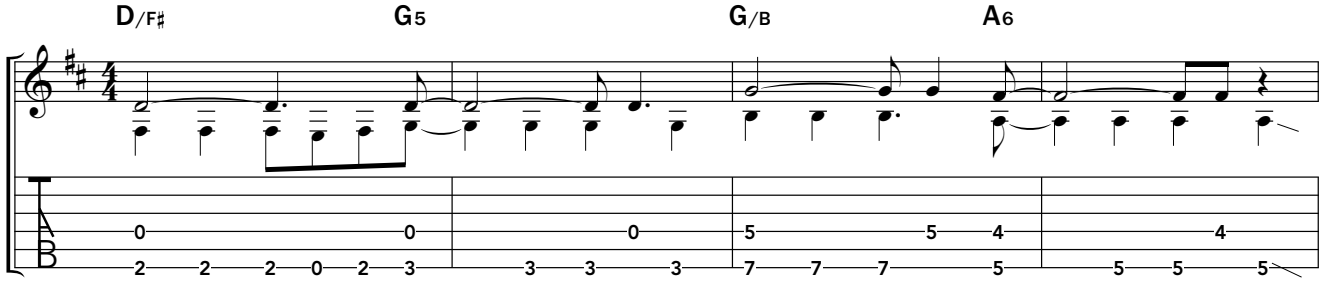
Example 2

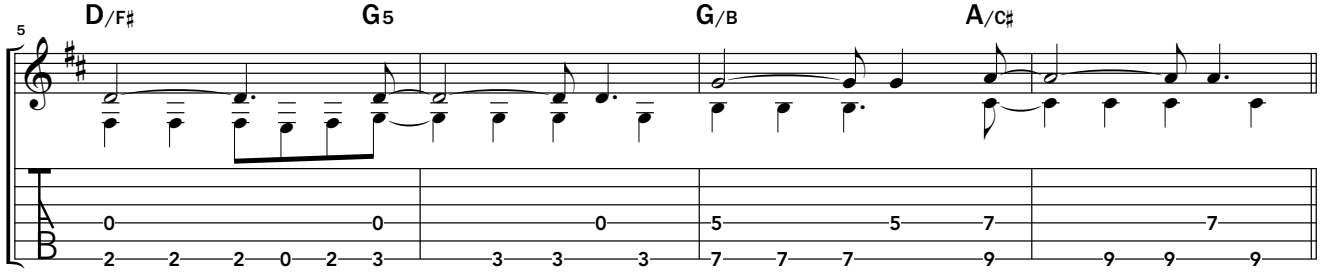


Example 3

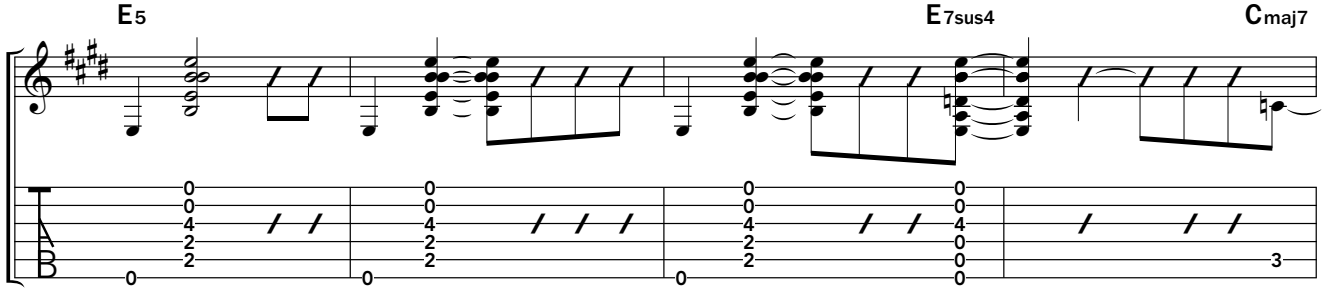


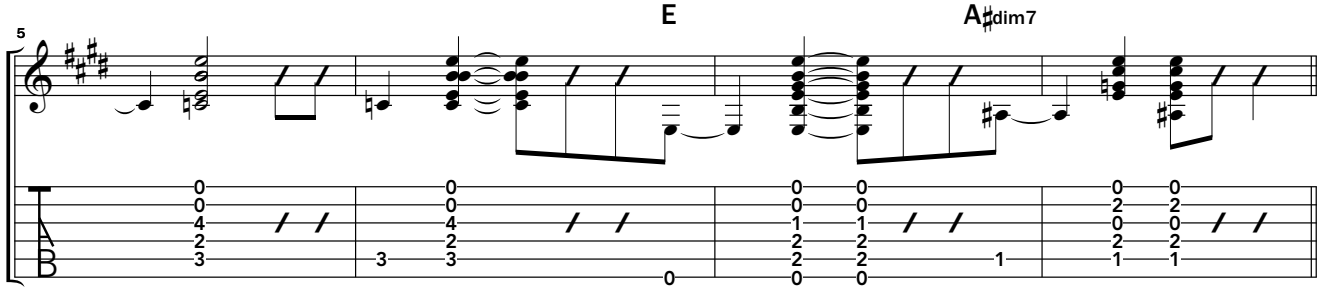
Example 4





Example 5













Playing for Life

The allure of the guitar is a lifelong motivator for professional and amateur players alike

BY MARK SMALL

By 2030, Baby Boomers (those born between 1945 and 1965) will all be 65 or older. For a huge number of them, guitar playing borders on obsession. Some became career musicians. Others, passionate about the guitar in their youth, pursued nonmusical careers but in their later years are returning to playing, determined to broaden their skills. Many others always wanted to play and are starting later in life. In this demographic, we find increased interest in music across the spectrum of instruments and musical genres, including classical.

Many players from this age group who chose careers in classical guitar continue touring, recording, and teaching. They, as well as those returning to playing later in life, have learned that it's important to adjust practice regimens or adopt new ones as their bodies age. In this feature, Benjamin Verdery, Andrew York, Stephen Robinson, and Raphaella Smits—all high-achieving professionals—share observations about how they maintain and continually improve their skills, while offering advice applicable to players of all ages and styles, including steel-string guitarists. Rick Lord, a player who made guitar his focal point after retiring from a non-music profession, also shares his experiences.

WE ARE PRACTICERS

Stephen Robinson, recording artist, recitalist, and recently retired Stetson University faculty member, says: "We are performers and musicians, but we spend the majority of our time practicing. So we have to learn to be the best practicers we can possibly be." Robinson advocates for warming up slowly and gradually. "This is a really important part of practicing for longevity," he says. "You need to wake up the hands slowly and take care of yourself."

Performer, recording artist, and recently retired faculty member at LUCA School of Arts in Flanders, Belgium, Raphaella Smits [profiled in the May/June 2023 issue] lets tone quality guide her warmup. "Since I was a kid, making a beautiful sound was always important and what people noticed in my playing," Smits says. "For my warmup, I try to make the best sonority from the beginning and spend the time to make it perfect."

Concert guitarist, composer, and Yale School of Music's guitar chair, Benjamin Verdery [see the July/August 2020 issue], adds: "One of the ways I warm up is by sight-reading. It's great for your mind." Verdery also cautions against sitting stationary for long practice sessions. "When I am practicing, every 20 minutes I get

BEN VERDERY BY JON OLSON, ANDREW YORK BY CHRISTINE LANG, STEPHEN ROBINSON BY KELLY ROBINSON, RAPHAELLA SMITS BY TONY MAECKELBERGHE

Clockwise from top left: Benjamin Verdery, Andrew York, Stephen Robinson, and Raphaella Smits

up and do a little stretching," he says. "I avoid locking into a position. It's the locking-in that can be a problem."

Andrew York, a former member of the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet [see September/October 2022 issue], now pursues a solo career as a performer, composer, and educator offering tips through his website, Andrew's Den, and his YouTube channel. "I am big on stretching and hand conditioning," York states. "I made a video of exercises given to me by a hand surgeon. I do them regularly because I have carpal tunnel and the beginnings of arthritis. It doesn't affect my playing, but sometimes hurts."

For Robinson, stretching exercises without the guitar are important. "We sit in a weird position for our legs," he says. "This can do a number on your hips after 40 or 50 years of playing. So leg, arm, and shoulder exercises as well as strengthening exercises at the gym are valuable. Even though we are just sitting with a little guitar, we may sit for long periods of time and need to counterbalance that with a good, full-body workout. You can't expect your body to sit in that position all of your life and not experience injuries here and there."

"I have to think about my posture now more than ever," Verdery adds. "When I sit, I tend to lean to the left and that can be a problem. Paying attention to your posture is always important and I think it's an underdiscussed aspect of classical guitar technique." Verdery also suggests players be aware of whether the support system they use for the left leg is causing back pain as they age. He also advises scrutinizing the height of the music stand. "Placing it so that you are always looking down can bring on neck issues," he opines. "Problems with the neck go right to the hand. Try placing the stand higher."

Echoing Verdery's thoughts on posture, Smits concludes, "If you have a good basic technique, play a lot, and sit in a healthy way, the body will be in harmony with what you're doing."

MEMORIZATION AND VISUALIZATION

Playing from memory is the ideal for most classical guitarists, but many find it takes extra effort to do it as the years go by. "If I really don't feel comfortable playing a piece from memory, I'll use the score onstage," Verdery says. "I like the freedom of not having to use the score, but I'm getting better at reading in a performance. You just have to do what really works for you and not let your pride or old habits get in the way. You are changing and have to be honest with yourself and recognize things are not as easy as they were in your younger years."

Rick Lord



COURTESY OF RICK LORD

York, who typically plays everything from memory, found he needed to do more work to prepare for his first post-pandemic concert. "During the two and a half years of the pandemic, I was playing a lot of new music and had to make sure everything was completely memorized," he says. "I thought keeping the music on the stand as I practiced would make it rock-solid in my memory. That didn't happen. I hadn't practiced this way before. I would always memorize things quickly and put the music away, only taking it out for reference, but never keeping it in front of me. That's like sitting in the passenger seat of the car when someone else is driving. I wouldn't be able to find my way back because I wasn't paying attention in the same way."

All of these players spend time sans guitar visualizing their hand movements while playing their repertoire mentally. "Visualization adds security to your playing," Robinson says. "When you don't do it, that's where the nerves come from. [Visualization] takes care of nervousness for me. After preparing that way, I can walk onstage confidently knowing what my hands are going to do."

Smits likes reading through her scores when taking long flights, but also visualizes the guitar neck. "I will close my eyes and see my left hand in my imagination and hear the music," she says. "That's when I really know the piece. The left hand moving on the fingerboard is in my memory, so if I read through the music without the guitar, I feel what my left hand is doing."

York visualizes the geometrical shapes the hands make and the arc his fingers form as they move. "Proprioception, or muscle memory and awareness of your hands in space, enables us to play," York says. "Muscle memory glues the geometric progression together." He's found that visualizing a written page in the mind can add complexity. "It's a notational system that has to be converted to the geometric shapes on the fingerboard," he says. "That's one step removed from reality and uses more processing power in your brain. The visual centers in the brain are huge and predominate; we are visual creatures. I want to pull my attention away and put it in the audio center."

ADULT STUDENTS

All of the pros interviewed here have noted the different goals of older learners they instruct in master classes or as private students. "I teach a lot of adult students now and they are all

different," observes Robinson. "Some have no desire to play for anyone; they love the music and are playing for themselves. I try to figure out what's important for each student in their study of the guitar and how we can make the guitar fit comfortably into their lives. Everybody has different responsibilities and hours to practice. We tailor the repertoire according to the amount of time they can practice."

When Smits teaches older students in master classes, her priority is to share the standards and esthetics of professional performers. "Some have gotten used to sounds and habits that are not so good," she says. "They can start to think buzzing notes or a poor sonority are normal. I try to open their ears to the problems and help them to improve by making a good sonority, balancing voices, and showing them fingerings that will make things easier.

"As you get older, you should know what you can play well and what you don't play well," continues. "Give what you can with the music you are good at, not what you are struggling to do."

'We sit in a weird position for our legs. This can do a number on your hips after 40 or 50 years of playing.'
—BENJAMIN VERDERY

Verdery always encourages his adult students to maintain a sense of joy and curiosity. "The joy is the most important thing," he says.

Rick Lord echoes the sentiments of Smits and Verdery. "If you choose repertoire that's within your reach, things go better," he says. "If you can play a simple piece well, people love it and you'll feel more confident." Lord earned a music degree with classical guitar as his principal instrument while in his 20s. He later entered the seminary to become an episcopal priest. He served various congregations for four decades, but always played a bit. He returned in earnest to guitar study in the later years of his career after venturing into a master class with Jason Vieaux. He then enrolled in Vieaux's ArtistWorks online guitar school.

"I went through his materials and got a lot of good feedback," Lord says. "Mostly I got inspiration knowing there was a player like Jason who took an interest." He subsequently completed guitar grades seven and eight with Simon Powis' Classical Guitar Corner Academy. "For people coming back to the guitar or beginning at this stage of life, many online curriculums are outstanding. I've used online platforms for years and my technique and playing are at a level I wouldn't have achieved before."

Lord gives a few recitals yearly and often plays at worship services, but making YouTube videos of introspective music including classical repertoire, hymns, carols, and movie themes is his main focus. He regularly posts videos he produces in his basement studio and has received positive comments from such international players as Laura Snowden and Uros Baric.

"Posting videos offers a chance to get your music out there, especially if you don't play live much," Lord says. "I feel that while I have time and my motor skills, I want to do as much as I can. There will come a time when I can't. Making videos is one way of leaving a footprint for the future. People I know who are of my generation are turning to music. It's great for our brains and well-being." AG



Julian Lage



SHERVIN LAINEZ



INSIDE THE LAYERS

Julian Lage champions the steel-string acoustic on his latest Blue Note release

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

With his 2015 album, *World's Fair*, Julian Lage offered a solo guitar tour de force—a collection of compositions as remarkable for their memorable melodies as for showcasing Lage's total command of the steel-string guitar, his ability to coax so many tonal nuances from his 1939 Martin 000-18. Around the same time, Lage began collaborating with Bill Collings on what would become his signature model Collings OM1 JL [reviewed in the April 2018 issue].

But since then, in leading his namesake jazz trio, Lage has focused on the electric—whether using a Fender Telecaster or his signature hollowbody Collings 470 JL—reaching ever higher levels of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic invention, not to mention technical wizardry. That's why it comes as a welcome surprise that for his latest EP on the storied Blue Note label, *The Layers*, recorded at the same time as 2022's *View with a Room,* instead of the expected electric, Lage plays his OM1 JL on half of the six tracks, including an intimate duet with guitarist Bill Frisell.

Having previously connected with Lage for *AG*'s April 2018 cover story, I caught up with the deep-thinking guitarist, composer, and improviser to learn more about his uncommon use of the steel-string guitar in the evolution of his ensemble, as well as collaborating with his wife, singer-songwriter Margaret Glaspy, who helps bring a narrative quality to his instrumental work.



COURTESY OF JULIAN LAGE

For your past handful of albums, your focus had been on the electric guitar trio. What was it about the batch of tunes on *The Layers* that called for you to play acoustic?

What's funny is I brought a bunch of guitars to the session, mostly electric, and only one acoustic. Taken as a whole, the two records have about 16 songs. Part of the reason I had an acoustic on standby was in case it felt like there was any fatigue of a certain sound. The first time that the acoustic entered the picture was with this duet with Bill [Frisell] called "This World." We had rehearsed all 16 songs on two acoustic guitars, even the ones that are electric. And I remember kind of taking note as we went through: 'OK, "This World" sounds really good as an acoustic arrangement.'

Was the process similar for the other two acoustic tunes on the recording, "The Layers" and "Double Southpaw"?

"The Layers" I had definitely considered electric. But then once we got to playing it and that fatigue came in, I thought, No, switch it up—let's go acoustic. And then "Double Southpaw" [see transcription on page 56.] was also planned as an electric trio, but for continuity's sake with the duo with Bill, I thought, Well, let's also do that as acoustic, but as a duet with [bassist] Jorge [Roeder]. The music definitely dictated when it felt appropriate to have a change. And it was all in relationship to what we already had, the things that were working so well electrically. We said, Well, let's not beat a dead horse. Let's just see if it works. And everything we tried really seemed to work well acoustically.

***The Layers* seems to be all about different ensemble configurations. What was it like to play acoustic in these settings, and did you discover anything new in the instrument in the process?**

I think you are hitting the nail on the head, which is that it was educational. I had recorded with acoustic guitar before and felt like, if not considered, it can have less power than electric guitar. A lot of my fascination with acoustic guitar has been, like with that *World's Fair* record, when you have just one acoustic guitar, it actually sounds bigger than a single electric with the band because it just occupies a bigger part of the frame. And so I had always thought that to make the acoustic guitar bigger, you need to have less around you. But—total humble pie, total humility—what I realized is that though that can be true, you can also play acoustic with an ensemble, like that song "The Layers," which is two acoustic guitars, bass, and drums, and it doesn't sound small. It just sounds like a different texture.

So I learned a lot about the utility of the instrument—that it still sounds like a leading voice, but by way of its texture, its intimacy, and its sonic profile. And I learned that in large part from making *The Layers*, whatever you're doing is the thing that will be noticed. I'm working on a new record right now and thinking about that more: If everything's equal, what's the timbre that we want? Which is certainly not novel, but I just kind of thought, Oh holy cow, I never put that two and two together.

I noticed that in the videos for the album, you're playing your Collings OM. What made it work so well here?

There's two things about the Collings that stand out to me. One is that its intonation is really good, and the way it resonates, it's bold. It's not like the Martin I've had for years but is just kind of sitting at home. That old 000-18, I love it, but for it to be in tune means to let certain things be kind of flat or kind of sharp, and that's when the guitar truly resonates.

The Collings is kind of extreme in the way it is really in tune, which is its own declaration. When the guitar enters, it's going to be defining what the pitch is going to be. So that's one thing that gave me maybe a little more wind in my sails as far as blending with Bill and Jorge as string instruments or blending timbrally with Dave King's drums. The intonation is just so clear on the Collings.

Why do you gravitate toward smaller-bodied acoustics?

In my experience, part of what I love about a true OM or short-scale 000 is the information that's left out of the guitar. There's not an abundance of low end that's swallowing up the mid-range, like you could have on a dreadnought—though there are obvious exceptions: dreadnoughts and jumbos that are perfectly balanced.

Julian Lage plays with bassist Jorge Roeder.

With the Collings I feel like I've got this really reliable midrange with a little bit of sparkle and a little bit of a honky, almost Tele-like, quality when I want it. Or it's very gentle, almost like a nylon-string, which I think you hear a little bit more on "This World." There's kind of a dulcet thing; the harmonics are just very clear and kind of felt-like. So I think between the intonation and the sound, it's not like I'm asking the band to come to an instrument that is so idiosyncratic that it makes them stand out too much or feel like they're walking on eggshells.

Your wife, Margaret Glaspy, produced *The Layers*. What was it like to collaborate with her in this way, and more generally, how has her input shaped the way you approach your music?

Margaret is an incredible guitarist and singer-songwriter and producer. And I think just as partners in crime for many years, I look to her for being a very honest barometer of the things I'm working on and the things we perceive in the world together. We have a very intimate understanding of each other's opinions and preferences. And not to say that they're one and the same, but there's a lot of mutual respect. So her role in the studio was almost like a traditional producer model. She was in the booth, listening to takes and going yay or nay. And for this project in particular, because it was a quartet of musicians as the dominant configuration in a room with no headphones, I really wanted to be alleviated of the bird's-eye view.

> 'What makes those songs compelling is their emotional narrative more than any one guitar moment.'
> —JULIAN LAGE

What did that look like?

I thought my best bet was just to listen as hard as I ever have listened in my life—just to be focused and be available to Bill, Dave, and Jorge. I didn't really want to be going, Was that a good solo, or did I play too long? Was that too gregarious? So I could easily hand over the satellite view to Margaret. I didn't take anything really personally. If she said, Well, no—do another [take], I'd go, Great, I'd love to. I didn't really care; I don't have that kind of relationship to the music. It liberated me and the band because they trust her, too.

The hardest thing I think to fathom, which was so valuable to us, was when we would play one take, and she'd say, "You're done." Because the professional musician part of our brains said, Well, surely this is going to be a process, and we'll do it until we get it. But that was really cool for her to say, "Nope, you don't need a backup. You're not going to do it better. You'll do it different, but you won't do it better."

The other thing is that Margaret's not easily impressed by things that are specific to, say, jazz guitar, because she's coming at this as a storyteller. Her business is: Is it a good narrative? Is it a compelling story? And I also love that because I didn't feel she would get excited about something that didn't feel universal, like a dazzling, specific guitar part.

Especially on *The Layers*, what makes those songs compelling is their emotional narrative more than any one guitar moment. And that's why I think they all ended up being put together as a record, because *View with a Room* was about grabbing the ear. It was about showcasing the trio [plus Bill Frisell]. It was about showing interplay and swing and these, like I said, more dazzling things. This record is about emotion, and Margaret's role as a producer really allowed that to happen. AG





Doc Watson

BLAIR JENSEN

20

Picking & Grinning

An exploration of Doc Watson's innovative and joyful guitar stylings

BY ALAN BARNOSKY

Flatpicking pioneer Arthel Lane "Doc" Watson was born in 1923, but it wasn't until nearly 40 years later that his musical career began in earnest. In the early 1960s, traveling folklorist Ralph Rinzler came across Watson while recording other area musicians and, amazed by his talent, encouraged him to join the burgeoning folk revival scene.

Within a few short years this blind guitarist from the mountains of North Carolina rose to prominence and for the next five decades charmed audiences with his easygoing, joyous, and captivating picking, singing, and storytelling. Watson passed away in 2012, at the age of 89, but his legacy lives on through the guitar stylings he created, his many recordings, the annual MerleFest music festival he founded in his son's memory, and the countless lives he has touched through his music, humor, and positivity.

Watson was an astonishing guitarist who practically invented bluegrass flatpicking and redefined the Travis-style approach to fingerpicking (see the transcription of "Doc's Guitar" on page 50), though he always humbly denied these facts. His lifelong musical accomplishments are innumerable, but what sets Watson apart from the multitude of acoustic guitar giants is the sincerity and joy in everything he did. Watch any live video footage of him performing and you will see that the person most enjoying the music is Watson himself—smiling, joking, encouraging his bandmates, telling stories, and fully engrossed.

The musical niche Watson created came from unifying the wide array of styles that he grew up listening to and playing. He is often considered a folk musician, but I believe he simply played the music he loved in the way that felt most natural to him. Watson recorded traditional mountain songs and fiddle tunes (like "Tom Dooley," "Little Sadie," and "Black Mountain Rag"), songs from the country artists of his childhood (by Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family, the Delmore Brothers, et al.), jazz standards ("Summertime," "Sweet Georgia Brown," and "Bye Bye Blues"), and songs from blues legends (Mississippi John Hurt, for one). There are even pre-1960 recordings floating around of Watson playing "Stardust" and other jazz tunes on an electric guitar.

This lesson breaks down Watson's acoustic flatpicking, beginning with rhythm and backup, transitioning to his lead playing, and ending with the combination of the two. For those interested in more background, a wonderful biography by Dan Miller is available for free, along with a multitude of other resources, at the Doc's Guitar website (docsguitar.com). In the meantime, enjoy this deep dive into Watson's picking style, and let it bring some joyfulness into your playing and into your life.

BOOM-CHUCK RHYTHMS

Watson's rhythm playing was largely influenced by the guitarists he grew up listening to. He adopted the scratch of Maybelle Carter, the bass runs of Riley Puckett, and the syncopations of Jimmie Rodgers to form a hard-driving momentum that fell right into the pocket of whatever situation he was playing in. The basis for the majority of Watson's rhythm work is the ubiquitous boom-chuck, consisting of a bass note on the lower strings on beats 1 and 3 (the boom, often played in an alternating pattern) and a downward strum on the upper strings on beats 2 and 4 (the chuck). **Example 1a** presents the standard boom-chuck pattern over a C chord using all downstrokes.

Watson used the standard boom-chuck often, but he also had variations to this pattern. **Example 1b** is another common strumming pattern of his, adding an upward strum on the "and" of beats 2 and of 4. With a chord tone picked using an upstroke between the boom and the chuck, **Example 1c** builds on the pattern in a different way. This approach appears often in Watson's playing and is perhaps most obvious in his famous rendition of "Tennessee Stud"—more on that in a bit. Finally, **Example 1d** combines the previous examples into a full down-up pattern with a pick stroke on every eighth note.

Despite their basic appearance, these patterns are difficult to play convincingly. Take them slow, focus on correct pick direction, and ensure that the strums do not overpower the bass notes on beats 1 and 3. Watson would use many of these patterns within a given song, or even within a measure, often with the more basic versions (like 1a and b) while he was singing, and the busier versions (1c and d) as flourishes during vocal pauses. Careful listening to Doc's playing on his more stripped-down recordings reveals how he did this; some of the best albums to track his rhythm stylings are *Jean Ritchie and Doc Watson at Folk City* (1963), *Southbound* (1966), *Live Recordings 1963–1980: Off the Record Volume 2* (with Bill Monroe, 1993), and *Doc & Dawg* (with David Grisman, 1997).

Watson used the standard boom-chuck often, but he also had variations to this pattern.

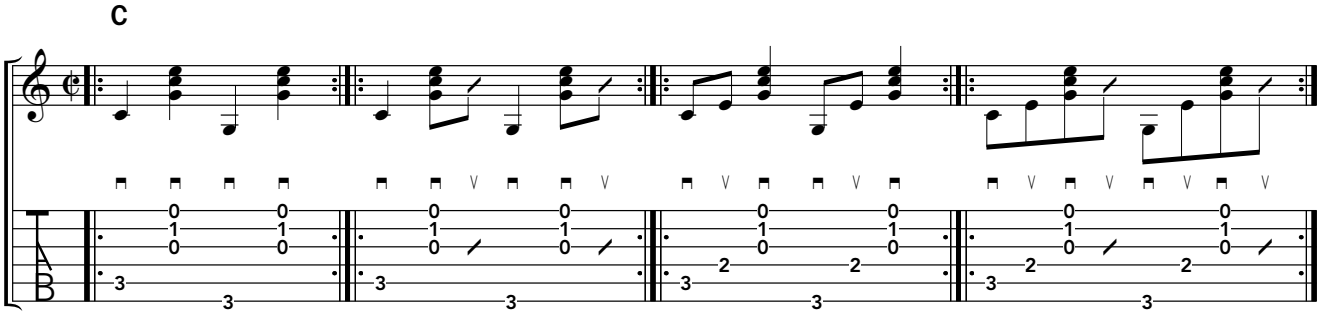
Inspired by Watson's backup while he sings the first verse of "Blue Ridge Mountain Blues" on *Jean Ritchie and Doc Watson*, **Example 2** is an excellent illustration of how he used the patterns shown above. Bars 1, 9, and 12–13 apply the Ex. 1a boom-chuck, while measures 3–5, 7, and 11 bring in the Ex. 1b rhythm. Note that Watson does not use a consistent alternating bass pattern but instead goes for walking bass movement, like the quick climb to D in bar 2 or the Riley Puckett–inspired bass line in bars 7–10. This example does not incorporate Exs. 1c or d, but you'll see these put to use in later selections.

EXTENDED BASS LINES

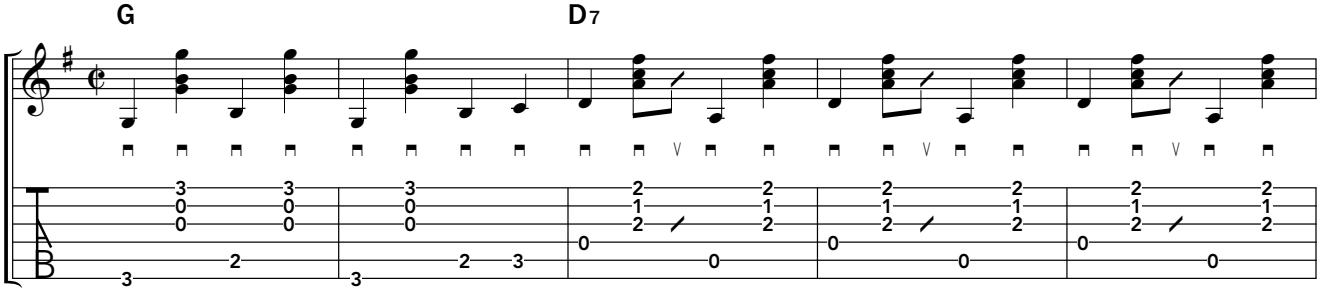
One of my favorite elements of Watson's style is his use of extended bass runs while backing up other instrumentalists. A perfect display of this is during his duet with Bill Monroe on "Feast Here Tonight," from *Live Recordings 1963–1980*. For Monroe's mandolin intro, the first verse, and the first chorus, Watson primarily uses boom-chuck with a few short bass lines inserted throughout.

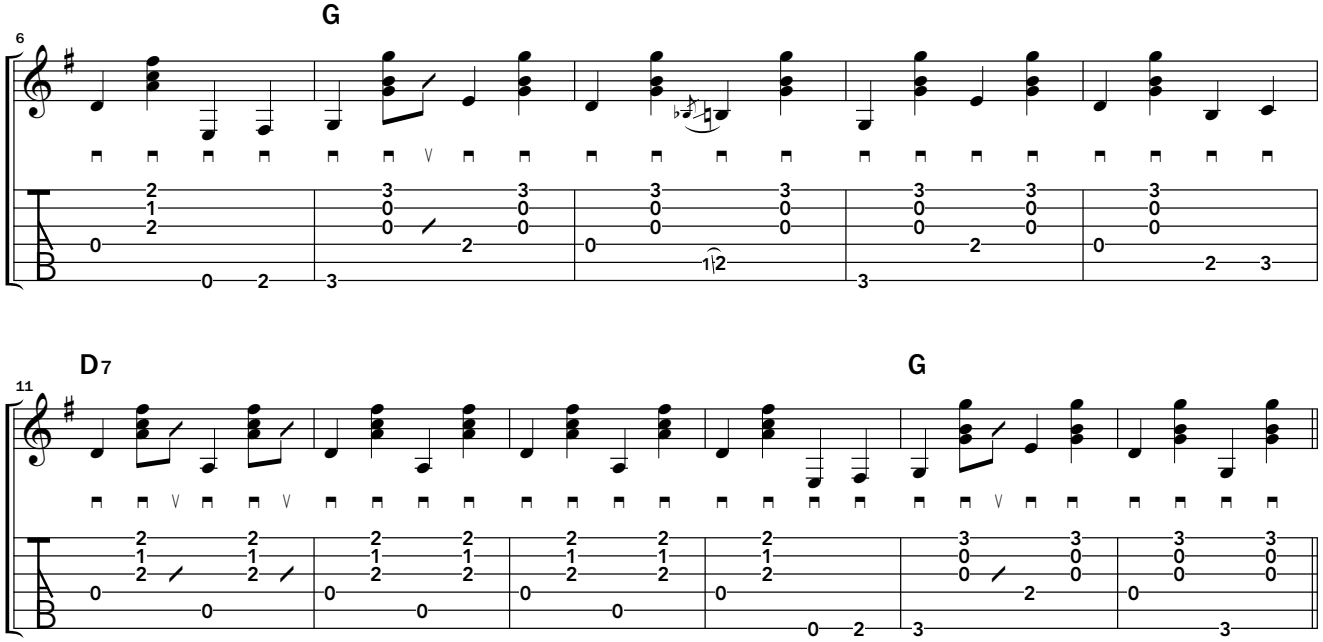
As Monroe kicks into his first solo, Watson switches to an extended bass line that adds momentum, interest, and a unique counterpoint to the mandolin, as shown in **Example 3**. Playing out of D, Watson runs up and down the strings, forming a walking bass line, and switches to boom-chuck only for a

Examples 1a–d



Example 2 (à la "Blue Ridge Mountain Blues")





Example 3 (à la "Feast Here Tonight")



couple of brief sections. Every note is played with a downstroke, bringing drive and power to the line. Only in the penultimate measure does he break the quarter-note pattern, signaling the end of the solo before returning to boom-chuck for the verse.

FIDDLE TUNES ON GUITAR

Watson amazed folk fans in the early 1960s by taking tunes typically reserved for the fiddle and reworking them for the acoustic with speed, clarity, and flash. He never claimed to be the first to play fiddle tunes on a guitar, but for the majority of listeners at the time it was an entirely novel and groundbreaking approach. Watson first began playing these tunes in the 1950s as an electric guitarist in a Western swing band. The group did not have a fiddler, and when audiences wanted a square dance set, Watson ran the melodies on his Gibson Les Paul. Later he transferred his fiddle-tune skills to the steel-string acoustic, giving way to what is now the well-established flatpicking style.

"June Apple" is a jam favorite, and Watson's rendition on *Doc Watson in Nashville: Good Deal!* (1968) is the standard approach for guitarists (**Example 4**). He kicks it off with "taters," a two-bar shuffle that sets the tempo and tells the other musicians when to come in. The tune itself then starts with a pickup into bar 3 using a quick hammer-on. The key to playing this tune—or any fiddle tune in the style of Watson—is to maintain alternating picking, coordinating downstrokes to happen on the beats and upstrokes to happen on the ands. Watson adopted his style by mimicking fiddlers, and alternating picking helps maintain the rhythmic bounce of the fiddle by having the heavier downstrokes land in coordination with the beats.

SIGNATURE LICKS

Some of the most recognizable features in Watson's picking were the slick, bluesy licks that he employed in all kinds of situations: at the end of or within a solo, in between vocal pauses, or even as backup. Watson often played out of the C position with a capo, so the licks presented here are all in C. **Example 5a** is an abbreviated lick that he used all the time. It appears in his rendition of "Streamline Cannonball" on *Good Deal!* and throughout a multitude of his recordings and live performances. He would play it as is, alter it a little bit, like in **Example 5b** (from "Footprints in the Snow" on *Treasures Untold)*, or a lot, as in **Example 5c**, which brings in triplets for the first half of the measure (from "Jimmy's Texas Blues" on *Doc Watson on Stage*).

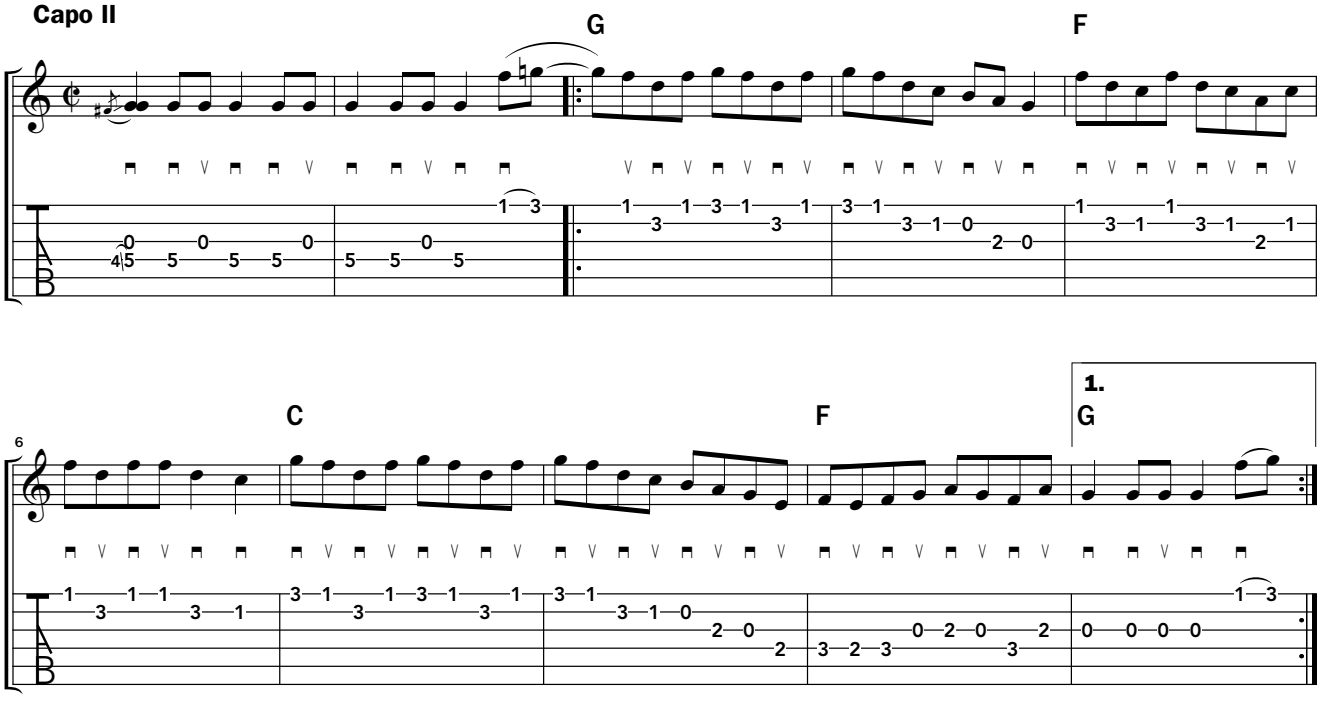
Another common lick of Watson's is similar to the famous G-run but over the C chord—see **Example 6a**, patterned after "I'm Worried Now" on *Portrait*. As in the previous examples, Watson would alter it in a bunch of different ways, for instance, with the chromatic line shown in **Example 6b**. He also regularly used fast chromatic bass runs to fill in vocal pauses like in **Example 7.** Both Exs. 6b and 7 can be heard several times on "Streamline Cannonball."

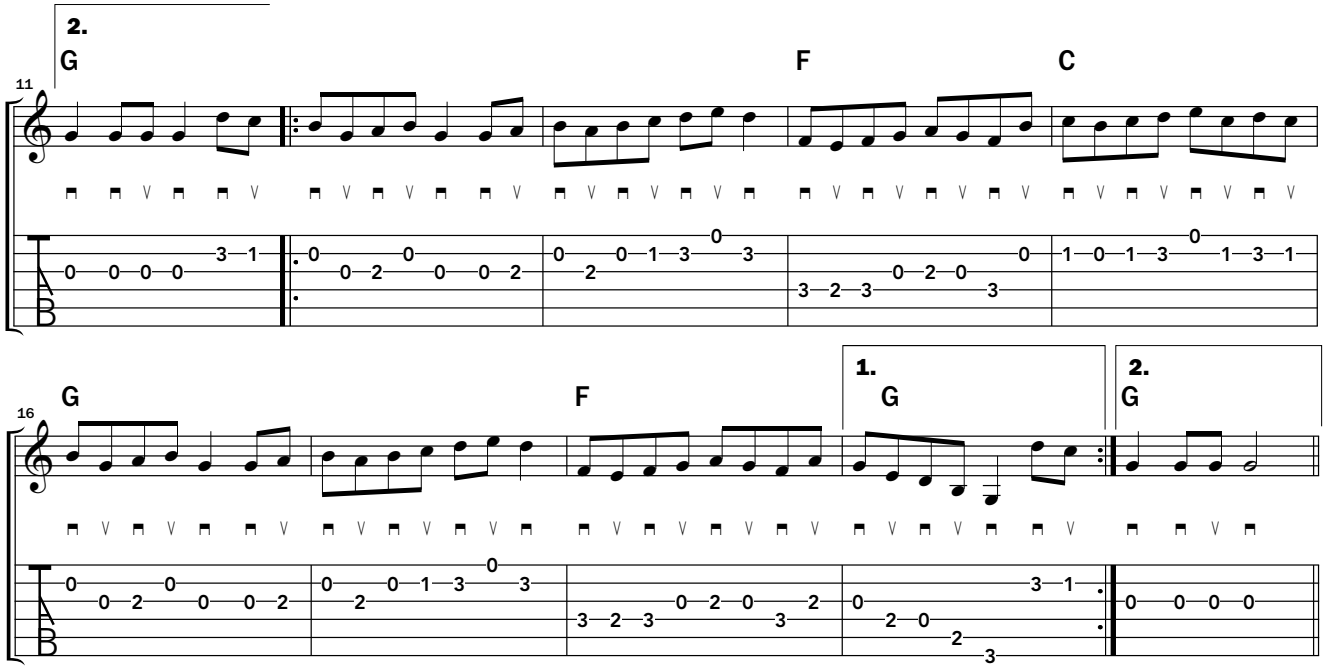
Watson altered and combined these types of ideas to fit the context of the song. **Example 8** comes to mind, a passage from his solo on "Ramshackle Shack" off *Riding the Midnight Train*. Notice that it doesn't specifically use the licks shown previously, but it almost sounds as if it does. This is a special element of Watson's style: He played naturally and intuitively and didn't rely on exact licks but still retained his own familiar sound. [For more on how Watson weaved these types of lines into melody-based solos, check out "Footprints in the Snow" in the January/February 2022 issue and "Greenville Trestle High" in July/August 2022. *–ed.*]

COMBINED RHYTHM AND LEAD

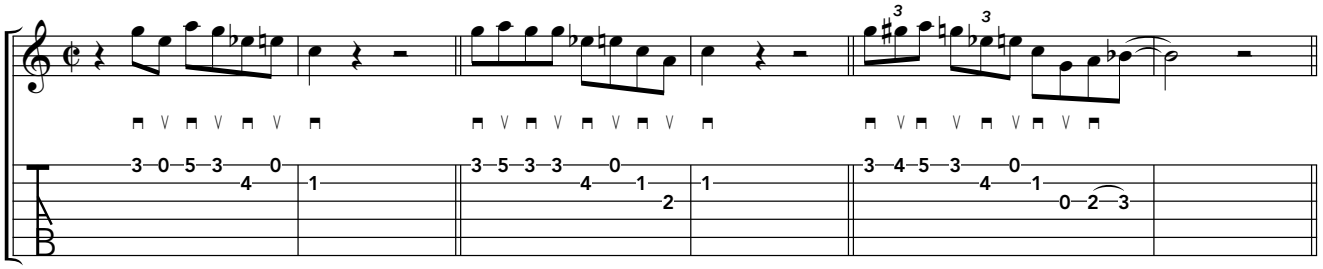
Watson's most celebrated songs from early in his career are the ones in which he combined rhythm and lead together for an all-inclusive one-man show. He famously did this with Merle Travis–inspired fingerpicking on such songs as "Deep River Blues" and "Sitting on

Example 4 (à la "June Apple")
Capo II



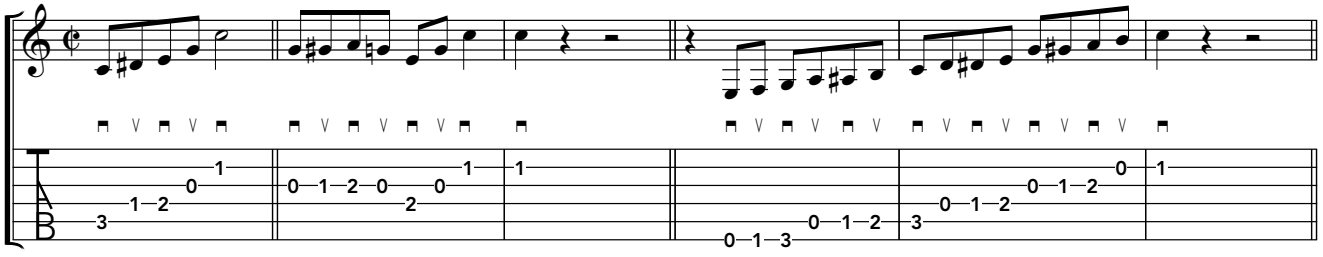


Examples 5a–c

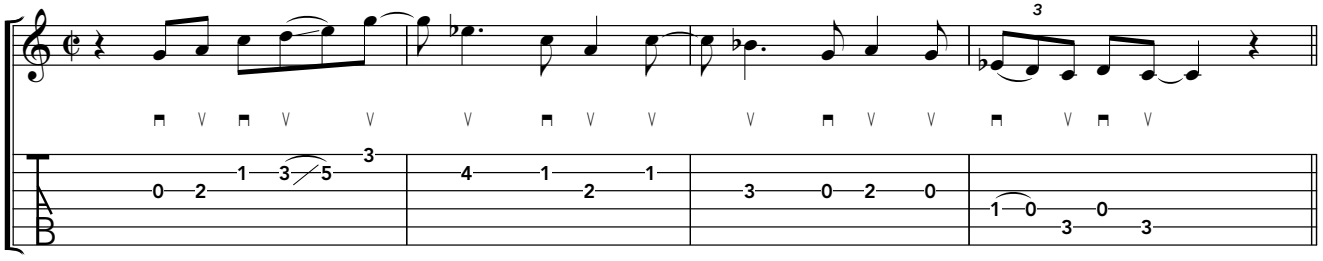


Examples 6a–b

Example 7



Example 8





ERIC FROMMER

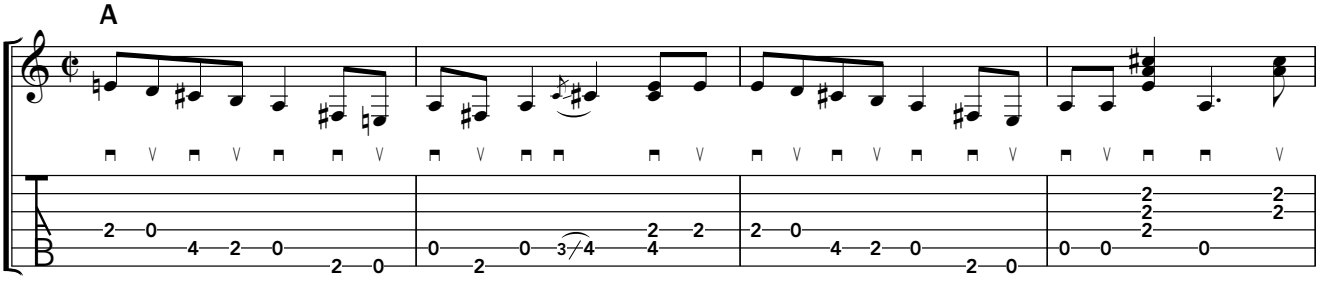
Top of the World," but he did it with a flatpick, too. Two favorites in this style are "Tennessee Stud" from *Southbound* (1966) and "Little Sadie" from *Doc Watson & Son* (1965).

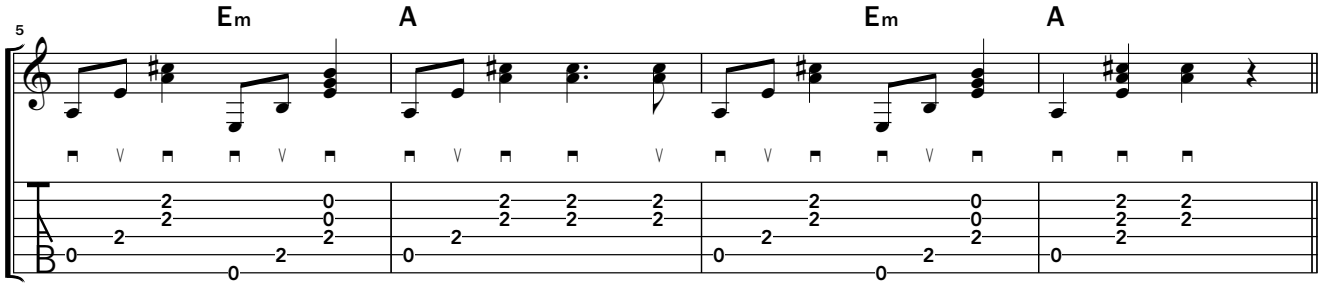
Watson played "Tennessee Stud" in open A position with a capo at the fifth fret, and began the tune with a flatpicked melody line in the lower register, similar to bars 1–3 of **Example 9**. He then transitioned to a rhythm-based pattern over the A and E minor chords that serve as a central hook in the song. Astute readers will notice it uses the same strumming shown above in Ex. 1c.

Example 10 tips its hat to Watson's intro and first verse for "Little Sadie." He plays the flatpicked melody and the verse rhythm many times with some variations, and the first pass serves as a good model for what he does later in the song. Notice how throughout the melody passage Watson includes quick boom-chuck strums that give the listener context to the chords, like the partial D minor in the second half of bar 2, the partial C in the first half of bar 3, and the more obvious C in bar 5. This is the essence of Watson's combined rhythm and lead approach, where he plays both melody lines and boom-chuck rhythm simultaneously.

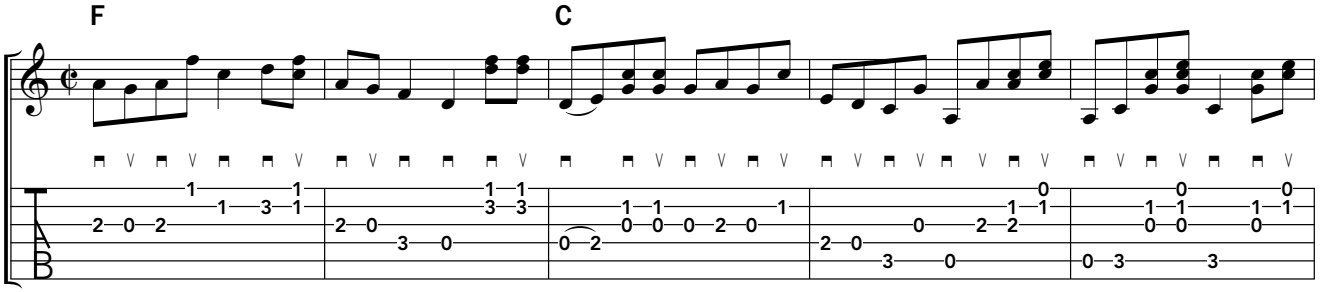
Over the years flatpickers have built an entire musical style upon the groundwork that Doc Watson pioneered, as seen in this lesson's cross section of his work. That said, the joy that Watson brought to the music seems to have taken a backseat compared to the flash and speed of modern bluegrass guitarists. Watson was indeed flashy and fast, but he was also really fun, and if there is anything you learn from his flatpicking style, I hope it is about harnessing and sharing the joy that playing music can bring. AG

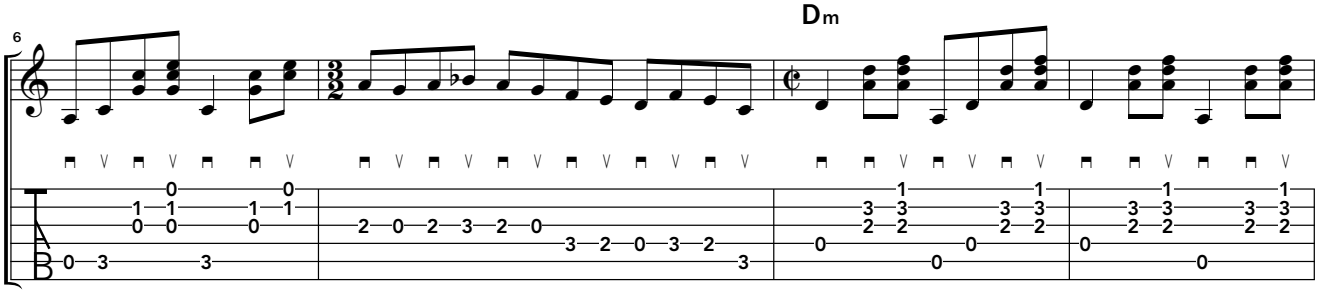
Example 9 (à la "Tennessee Stud")
Capo V

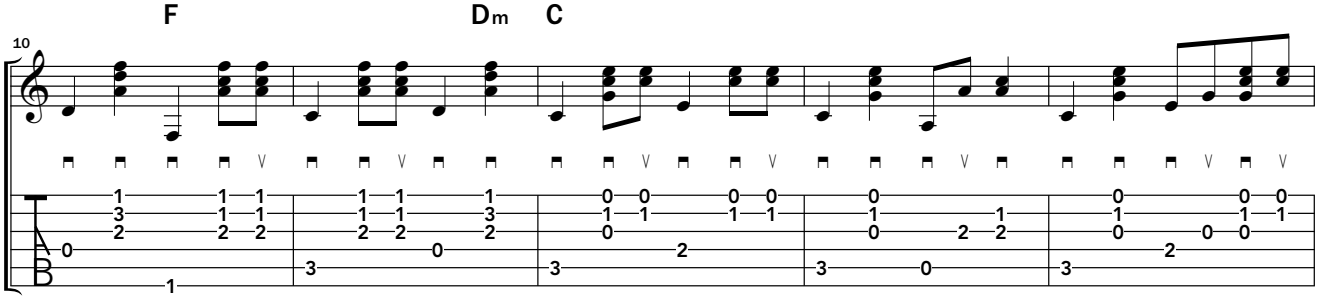


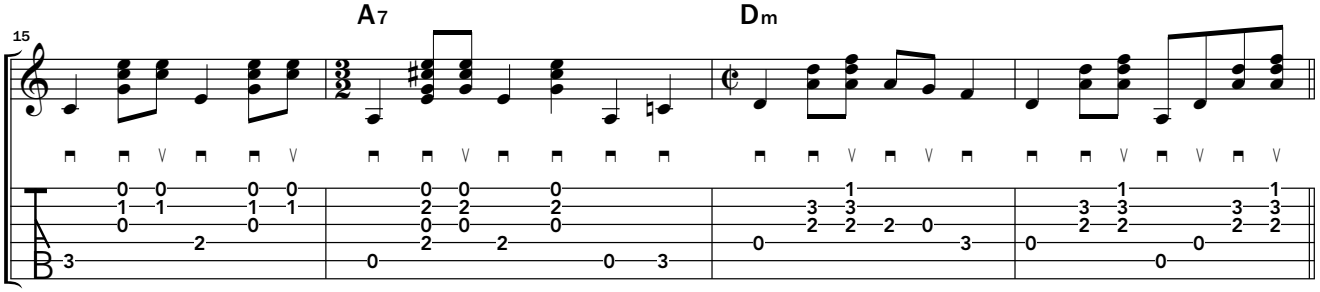


Example 10 (à la "Little Sadie")









Going Out with a Boom

Learn these essential Americana accompaniment patterns in D major

BY CATHY FINK

Cathy Fink



COURTESY OF CATHY FINK

THE PROBLEM:

You are familiar with basic boom-chuck patterns in different keys, but not yet the common guitar key of D major.

THE SOLUTION:

Learn the basic boom-chuck accompaniment on a I–IV–V (D–G–A) progression in D, then make it sound more interesting by playing around with the bass line in a couple of different variations.

If you've been following along with this six-part series on strumming fundamentals, then you've gotten a pretty good handle on Americana-style guitar accompaniment, from the simplest strums to more involved boom-chuck patterns. We'll close things out by exploring boom-chuck in D, using some of the moves you have already learned to play, and hopefully perfected, in several other keys.

1 START WITH THE BASIC PATTERN

Remember that to play boom-chuck in its simplest form, you hold down a given chord shape with your fretting fingers while picking bass notes, usually roots and fifths, on beats 1 and 3, and strumming the top strings on beats 2 and 4. As shown in **Example 1**, the bass pattern can start with a root and go down to the fifth on a lower string, as on the D and A chords, or, as in the case of the G chord, start with the root on the sixth string, followed by the fifth on a higher string. Practice this pattern slowly, until you can play it cleanly at a brisk tempo. And if you'd like, for the V chord in this example as well as the others, you can play an open A7 (X 0 2 0 2 0) instead of A.

2 MODIFY THE BASS LINE

Once you're comfortable with the basic pattern, switch things up in the bass line (**Example 2**). In bar 2, play an F♯ on beat 4, leading smoothly to the G in the following measure. When moving between the G chord in bar 4 and the A in bar 5, you can play a neat chromatic line in the bass—G to G♯ to A, and to then switch between the A and D chords in the sixth and seventh measures, try a bass line that moves straight up the notes in the D major scale (D E F♯ G A B C♯): A on beat 1 of bar 6, followed by B and C♯ on beats 3 and 4, respectively, landing squarely on the root of the D chord (D) on beat 1 of bar 7. This figure requires just a little bit more of your fretting fingers, so make sure that you can play it cleanly and in rhythm before moving forward.

3 FANCY THINGS UP

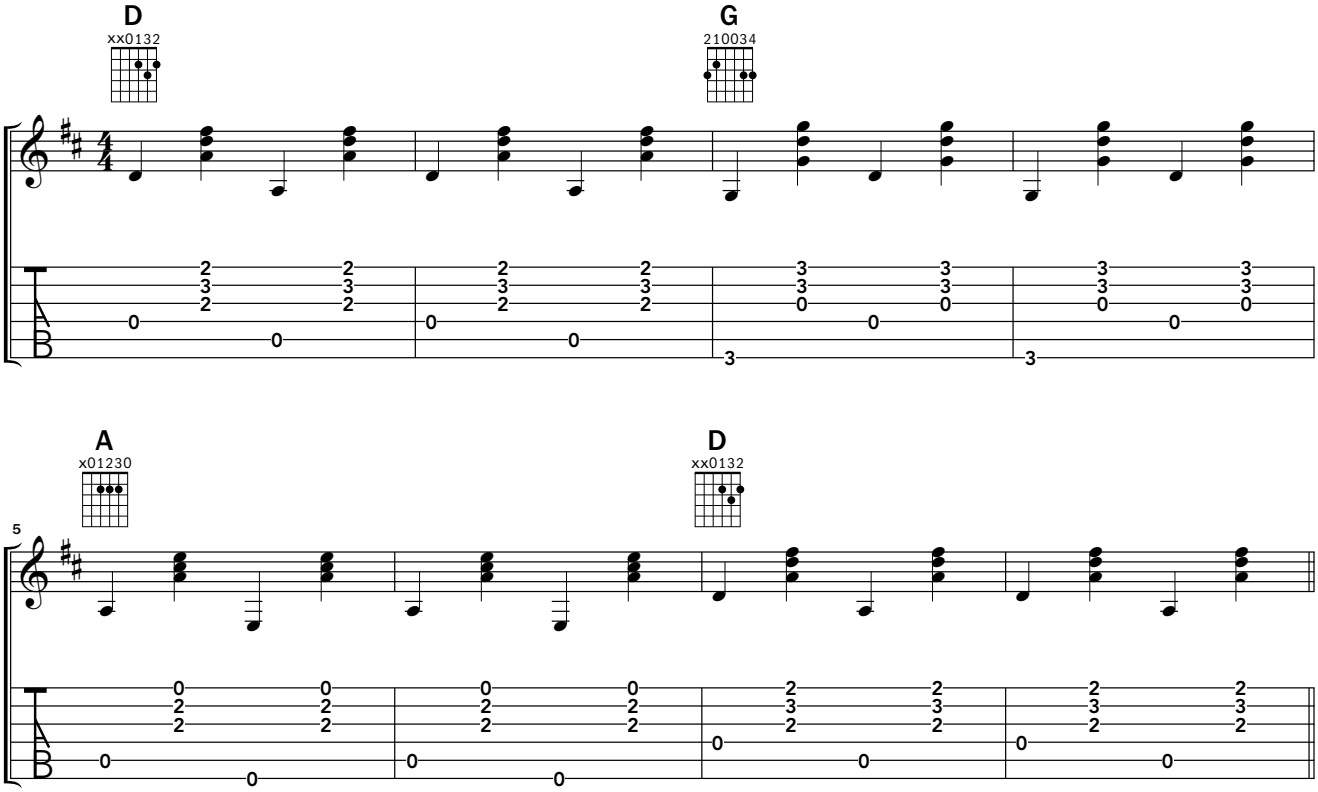
Example 3 kicks things up a notch with a pattern that behaves less predictably. The figure begins the same as Ex. 2, but takes a different approach starting in bar 4, where the bass line includes the sixth (E) of the G chord and descends, rather than ascends, between the G and A chords. Of particular interest is the fill in measure 6, which brings eighth notes—twice as fast as the quarter notes that occur throughout the previous examples—into the equation.

The fill is played with a slide and a pair of pull-offs. For the slide, fret the E on string 4, fret 2, with your second finger, pick the note, and then sound the F♯ by shifting that finger up two frets without removing it from the string. For the pull-off to the open D, fret the E with your first finger, pick the string, and then sound the lower note by lifting your finger off the string in a downward flicking motion. Repeat this move, but on string 5, for the pull-off that follows. It might take a bit of practice to get this measure sounding perfect, but the effort is well worth it.

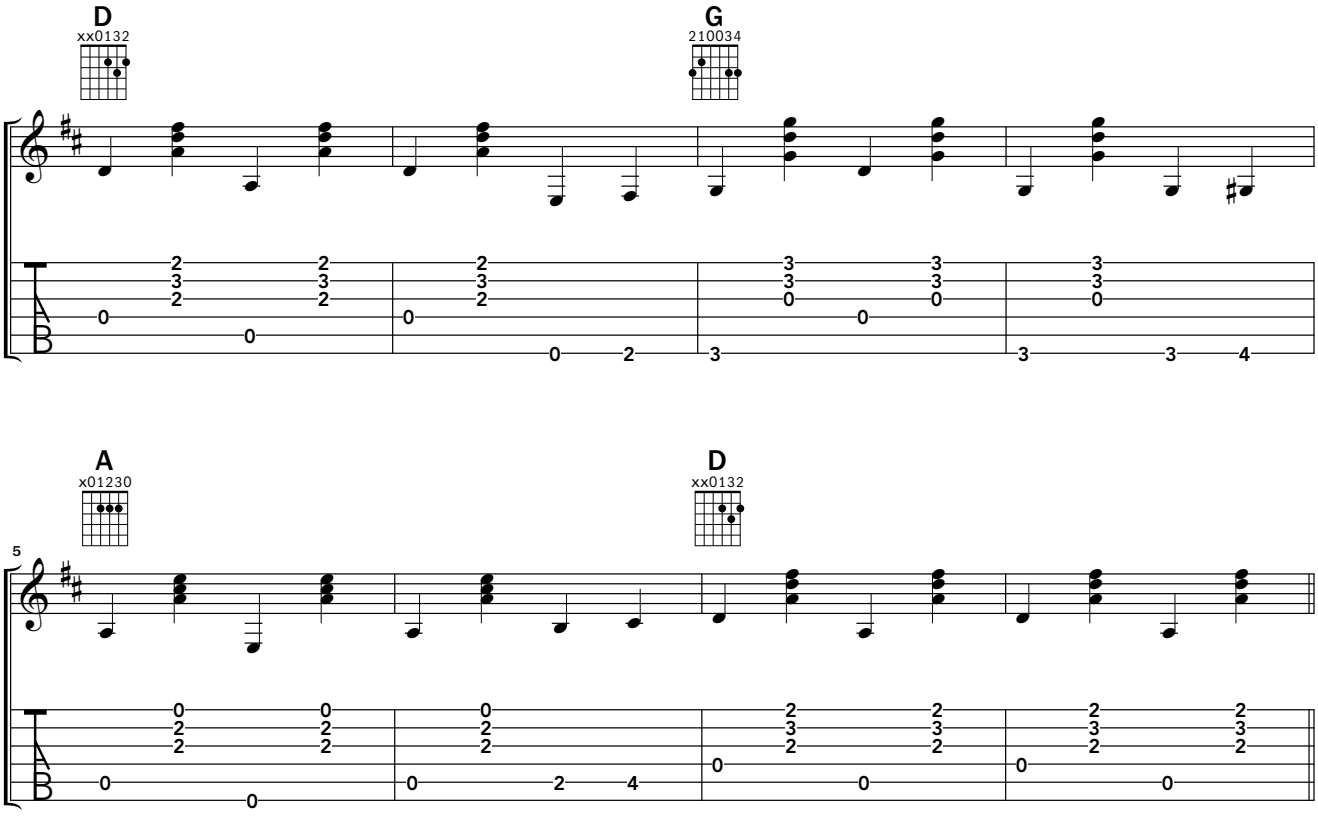
I hope you have enjoyed this series, and that you've learned a whole bunch of rhythmic moves that you can use in many different settings, whether accompanying yourself or strumming along with friends. AG

Cathy Fink is a Grammy Award–winning multi-instrumentalist based in the Washington, D.C., area. She teaches bluegrass and Americana guitar and performs around the world with her partner, Marcy Marxer. cathymarcy.com

Example 1



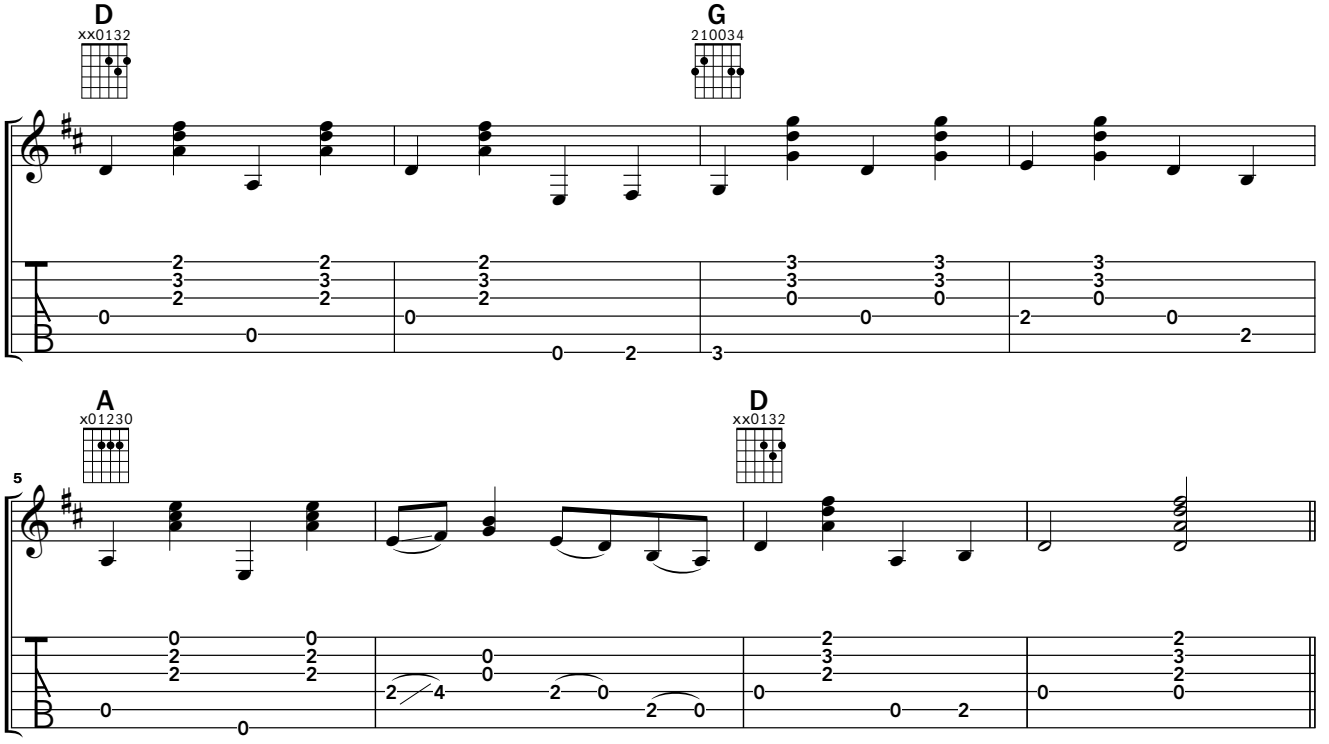
Example 2



Cont. on p. 42

Cont. from p. 41

Example 3














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Connecting the Dots

Try these exercises for mapping triads all over the fretboard

BY GRANT GORDY

Grant Gordy



JACOB BLICKENSTAFF

Triad-based chord shapes are some of the first things guitarists learn. While advancing players might focus on new sounds like seventh, ninth, and other extended and altered chords, it can be easy to forget how powerful the simple triad can be. In fact, this three-note chord type is the foundational basis of most chord progressions and melodies in American vernacular music—even bebop and other complex jazz styles. Keeping this concept in mind, you can use a triadic approach to map out the whole fretboard in ways that can help you break out of ruts and develop a deeper understanding of the guitar and music in general.

These methods are fairly simple on a conceptual level and don't take a lot of technical skill to play, but it may take you time to internalize the sounds and their relationships. Remember that the exercises in all four weeks are interconnected, so be sure to internalize them thoroughly and in sequence.

WEEK ONE

Strange as it may sound, the focus of Week 1 doesn't even require that you have a guitar in your hands. It's primarily about learning to identify the sound of each member of the triad—the root, third, and fifth, or G, B, and D, respectively, for a G major triad. What do these notes sound like to you in relation to each other? Can you ascribe a color or mood to them?

To really ground yourself in the sound of those notes, it's helpful to think of song examples that start with each of the triad tones. A couple examples of well-known melodies whose first note is the root of the chord would be "Sweet Georgia Brown" (**Example 1**) and "Beautiful Dreamer" (**Example 2**). Instances of the first note being the third are "Go Tell It on the Mountain" (**Example 3**) and Ludwig van Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" (**Example 4**). Among those beginning with a fifth are "Just a Closer Walk with Thee" (**Example 5**) and "We Shall Overcome" (**Example 6**).

Take these song examples and really concentrate on what that first note sounds like against the chord. Hum the melody, play it on your guitar with a backing track, play it in your mind's ear. And find your own examples of melodies that start with the root, third, or fifth—there are countless others! Then try to branch out and notice instances besides the first note where you hear those chord tones. This part of the practice isn't even about technically mastering tunes—although good melodies are always worth learning!—it's a deep practice for being able to quickly hear and clearly distinguish these three sounds by ear in various contexts. The implications of this for your playing are powerful.

WEEK TWO

Now map out those roots, thirds, and fifths in every triad combination on the fingerboard, starting in the lowest available position. You'll also connect the triads to the major scale, and vice versa. Continuing with the key of G, as shown in **Example 7**, start with a root-position triad with the root note (G) on string 6, third (B) on string 5, and fifth (D) on string 4. Stay in position, and then thread the G major scale (G A B C D E F♯) through this triad, playing from G up to D and back

Beginners' Tip #1

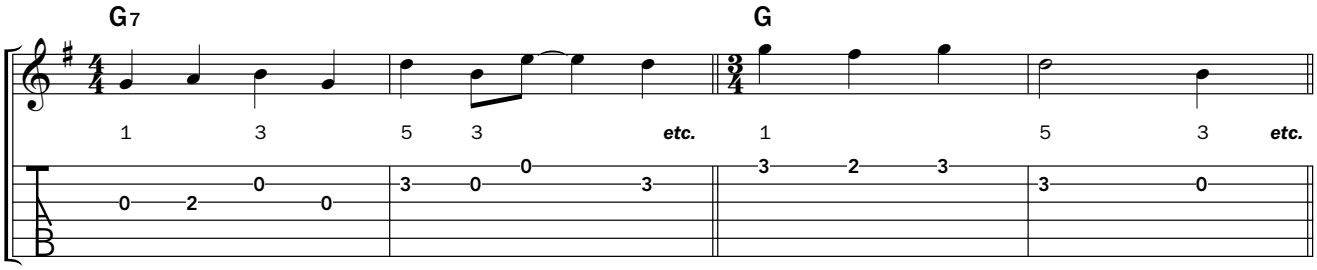
Try flipping through radio stations/playlists and see if you can pick out which triad note the melody of a given song starts on, or which one a phrase ends on.

Beginners' Tip #2

Pay attention to the shapes you're making with each new inversion and string set as you go up the neck; you'll start to notice a lot of similarity to open-position chords that you're already familiar with.

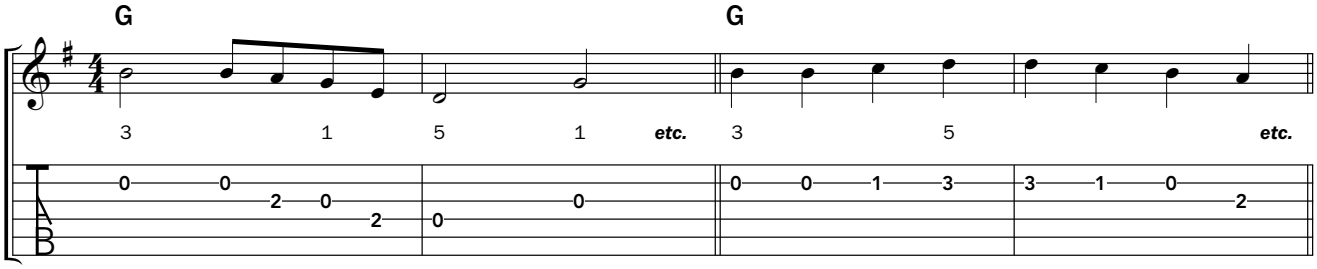
WEEK 1

Example 1: “Sweet Georgia Brown”



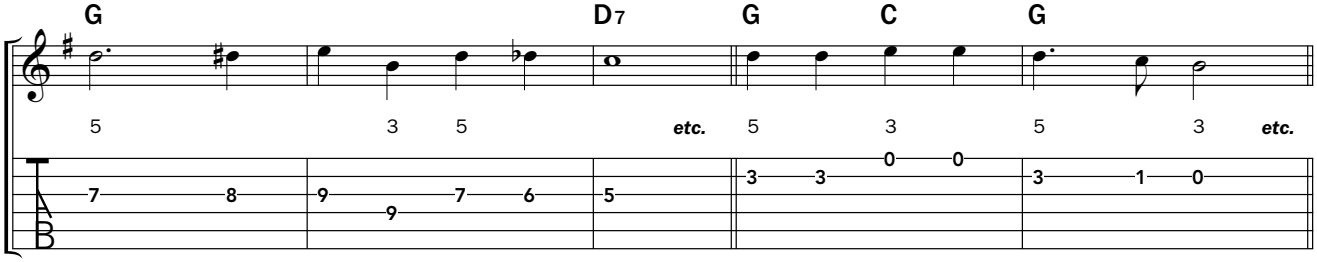
Example 2: “Beautiful Dreamer”

Example 3: “Go Tell It on the Mountain”



Example 4: “Ode to Joy”

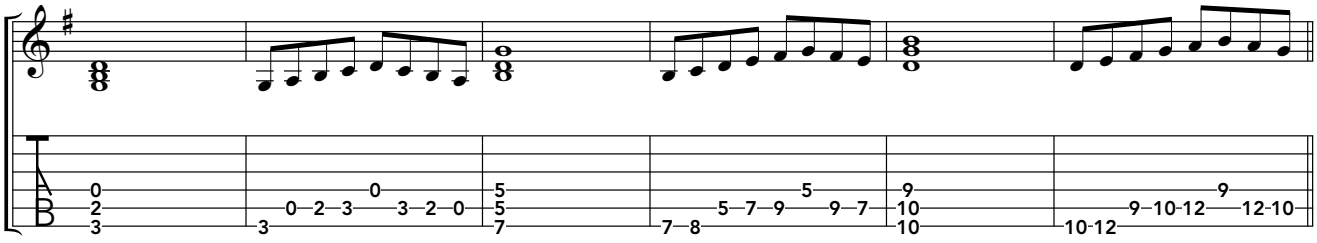
Example 5: “Just a Closer Walk with Thee”



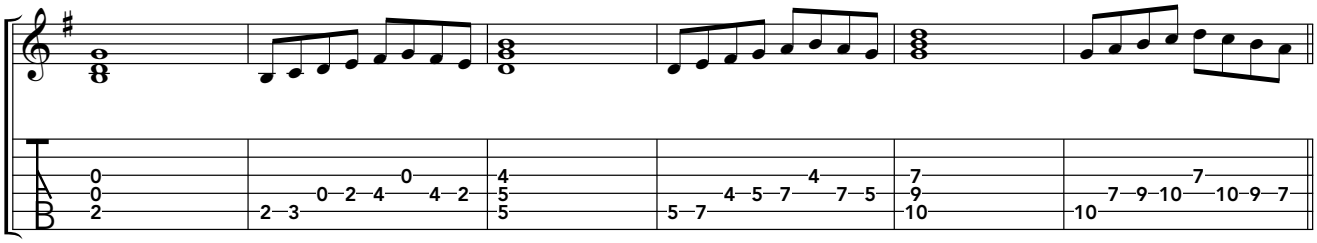
Example 6: “We Shall Overcome”

WEEK 2

Example 7



Example 8



down. Keeping the scale inside the confines of the triad, you'll get a good sense of the harmonic and linear relationships between the three notes.

In bar 3, take that G major triad and invert it, or move each chord tone up to the next closest note—the root goes to the third (B on string 6, fret 7), the third to the fifth (D on string 5, fret 5), and the fifth to the root (G on string 4, fret 5). The chord is now in what's called first inversion. Play the scale through the new inversion, from the third up to the root and back down, before continuing to second inversion (5, 1, 3), starting in the penultimate measure.

Remember that as you go through this inversion practice, it is critical to have the sounds of the root, third, and fifth solidly in your ear; it'll ground you to where you are in the scale, helping orient your way through the sounds of the different stacks of roots, thirds, and fifths. Notice, too, how the various inversions sound different but the same.

As shown in **Example 8**, repeat the process on string set 5–3 with the lowest G triad, in first inversion, the third on string 5, fret 2. Then do the same on string set 4–2 (**Example 9**), beginning in second inversion, with the lowest note being the fifth, the open D. For each of this week's examples, repeat the pattern as high up the neck as you can comfortably go. Soon you'll have every possible G major on the neck mapped out, along with every part of the G major scale. Practice playing major triads and scales in all 12 keys using this method.

WEEK THREE

When you've got a good handle on the three parts of the triad and can invert them on string sets all across the neck, try switching between G and C chords, shifting each voice in the chord as little as possible—a technique known as voice leading. As shown in **Example 10**, if you're starting with a root-position G major triad, the nearest C chord will be second inversion: the root of G will stay put, becoming the fifth of C; the third of G (B) will move a half step up to the root of C; and the fifth of G will shift up a whole step, now functioning as the third of C.

Try playing this chord sequence starting with all three inversions of G, in every available position and octave. Listen closely to what each voice sounds like as it moves between the two chords. Then, experiment with different chord resolutions, like dominant to minor. For instance, try replacing the fifth or the root of G with the flatted seventh (F) to get a G7–Cm progression (**Example 11**). This approach can help break you out of static chord shapes, too—rather than conceiving of G13 in a fixed position, try visualizing the flatted seventh and the 13th (E) in relation to the triadic map you've built, with those upper notes orbiting around the basic triads, as depicted in **Examples 12–13**.

WEEK FOUR

Clearly hearing the sounds of the individual triad notes of every chord, having these triadic shapes mapped in your mind as you navigate the fretboard, seeing the voice-leading movement that happens between chord changes, and visualizing how various scales moves through the various triads, you'll have a lot of the raw materials necessary for both interesting accompaniment and coherent soloing vocabulary.

Generally speaking, a high percentage of melodies and solos consists of triad members on beats 1 and 3 of a measure in common time. Try playing the licks in **Examples 14–15** as they move through different kinds of chord changes, and notice how certain chord tones line up with certain beats in the measure. How this unfolds in your own improvised solo lines will vary with elements like phrasing, musical style, feel, and other factors, but these written samples exemplify the principle at work here. AG

Grant Gordy, profiled in the March/April 2023 issue, is a modern flatpicking and jazz guitarist, composer, arranger, and teacher based in Brooklyn, NY. grantgordy.com

Beginners' Tip #3

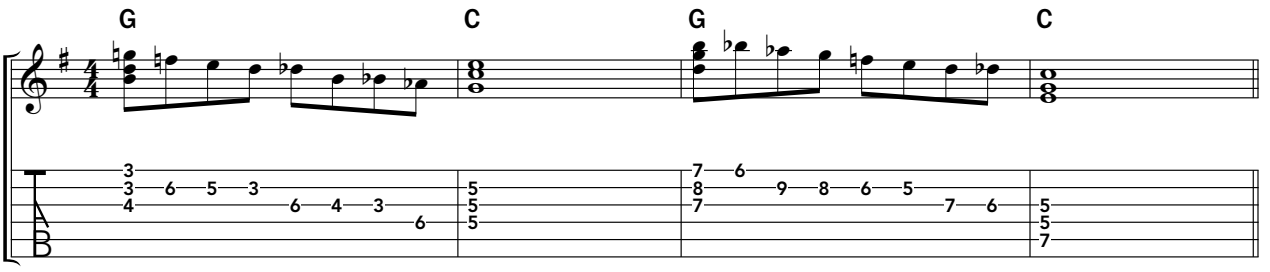
Try this voice-leading method on some of your favorite songs: See how many of the chord changes you can get through with triads while moving up and down the neck as little as possible.

Beginners' Tip #4

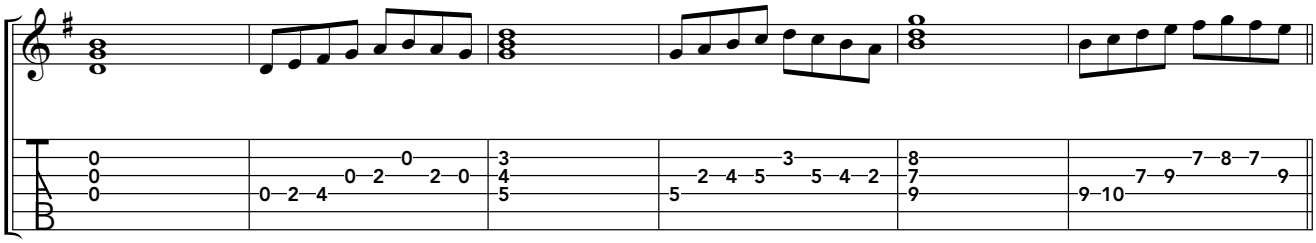
While you're playing through different scales and licks and observing their relationships to triads, try out different fretting-hand fingerings, to avoid getting locked down into one position.

TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Once you're familiar with visualizing and playing triad inversions all over the fretboard, try stringing them together using different scales and modes. For instance, this example uses the tense-sounding diminished scale—a symmetrical collection of alternating half and whole steps, heard often in jazz—to connect inversions of G and C major triads.

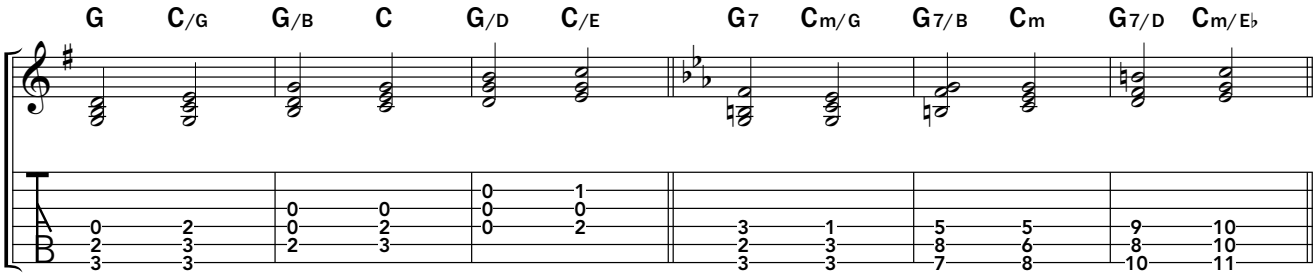


Example 9



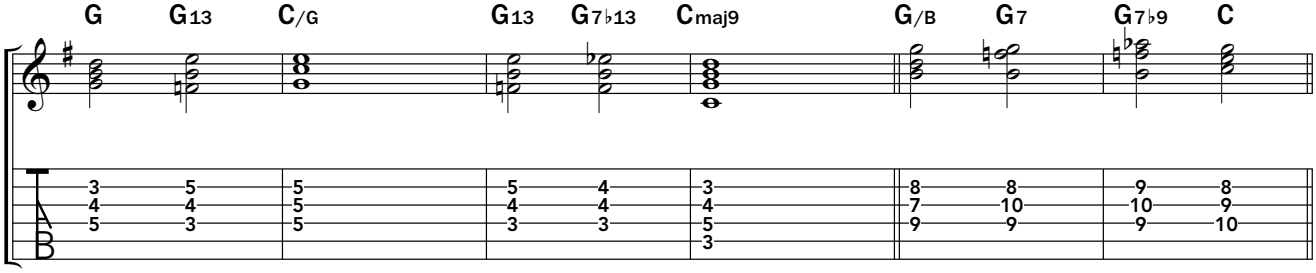
WEEK 3

Example 10



Example 11

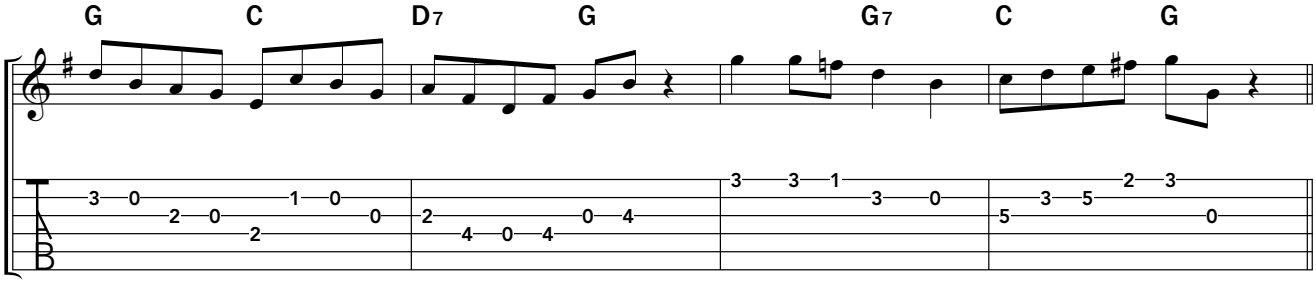
Example 12



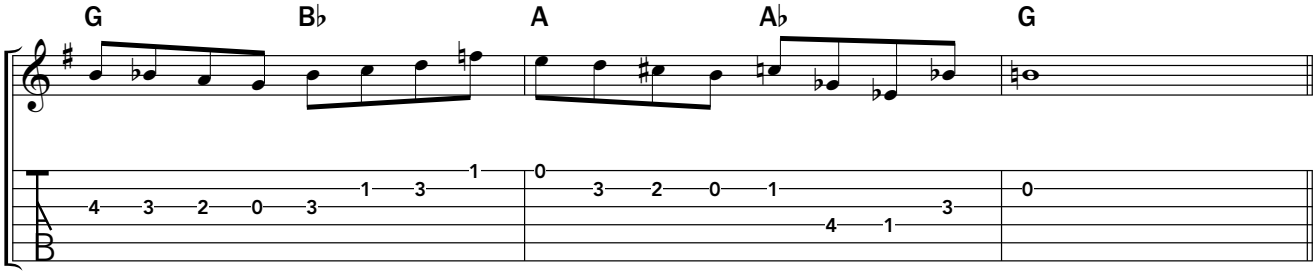
Example 13

WEEK 4

Example 14



Example 15



Doc's Guitar

Pioneering flatpicker Doc Watson's fingerstyle tour de force

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

Doc Watson was not just a flatpicking titan, but a fingerstyle force as well, whether in the context of playing accompaniment or solo guitar. The brilliance of Watson's right-hand technique can be clearly heard on his composition "Doc's Guitar," a punishingly fast instrumental that crams a nonstop flurry of notes into barely over a minute's worth of music.

This transcription of "Doc's Guitar" comes from the version that appears on *The Best of Doc Watson: 1964–1968* (Vanguard). The piece is played in the key of C major, with a capo at the second fret causing it to sound in D. Based on simple chord shapes in the cowboy position, it isn't terribly demanding of the fretting fingers, but the syncopated fingerpicking patterns can be tricky, to say the least, to master at tempo.

To learn the piece, it would be best to play it very slowly—say, half speed or lower—using a metronome or playing along with the original recording using software to adjust the playback tempo. As you would in learning any fingerpicking piece, pay close attention to where the thumbpicked notes (those with downward stems) fall in relation to those played by the fingers (upward stems), and to which notes are picked versus articulated with hammer-ons or pull-offs.

Doc Watson

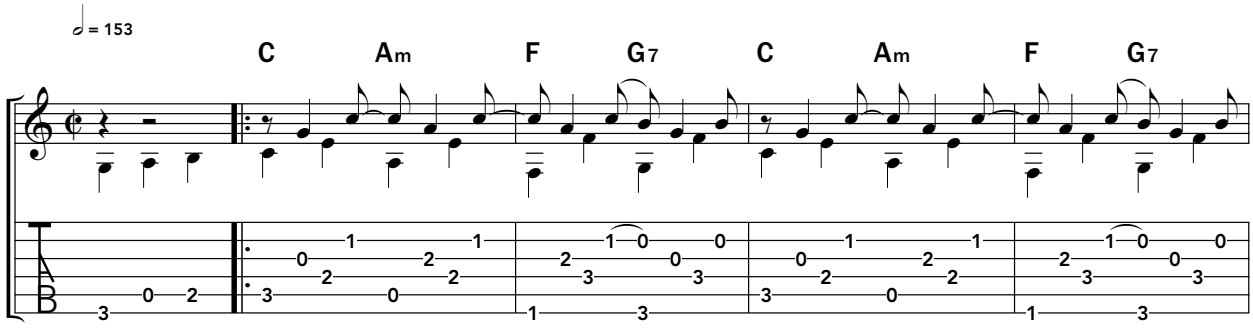


BLAIR JENSEN

Tackle the piece systematically, first measure by measure and then phrase by phrase, ironing out any kinks along the way, until you can play the whole composition from beginning to end without making errors. Try to avoid unnecessary tension in your body, hands, and fingers. Then, however long it takes, gradually increase the speed until you can effortlessly match Watson's tempo—admittedly, easier said than done. AG

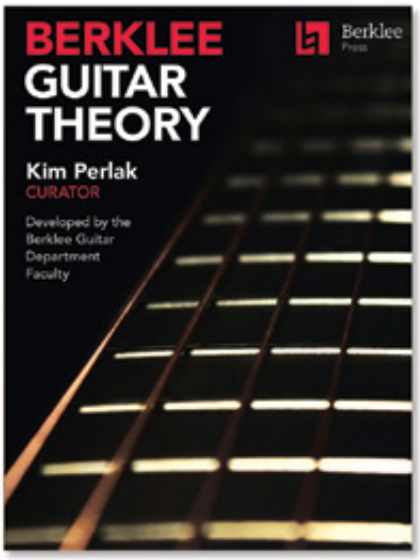
DOC'S GUITAR

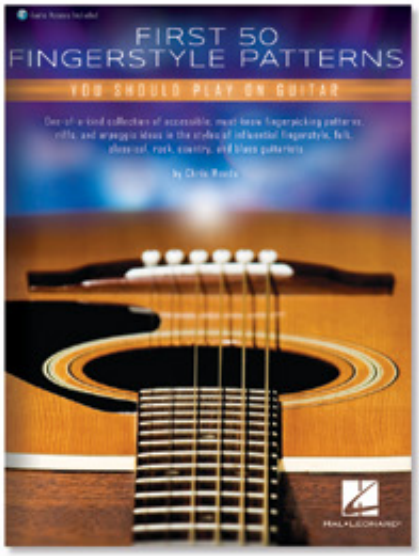
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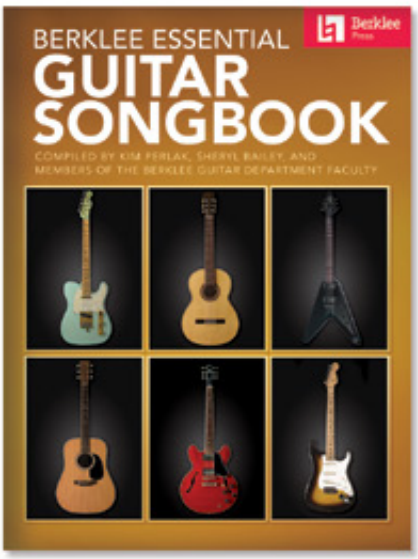


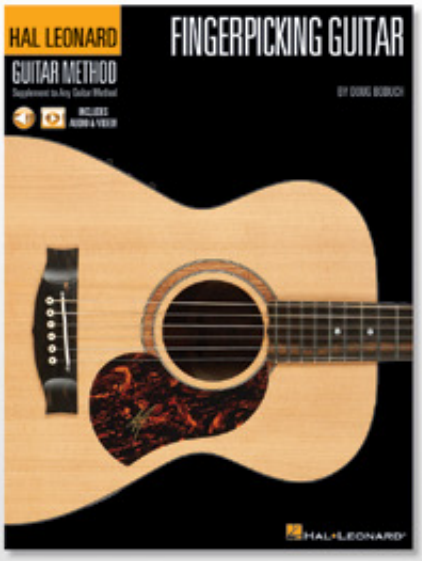
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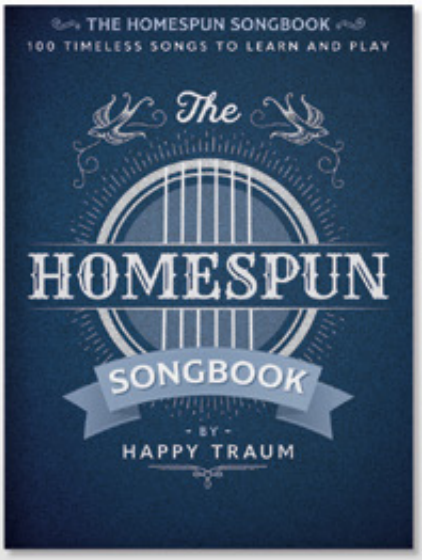
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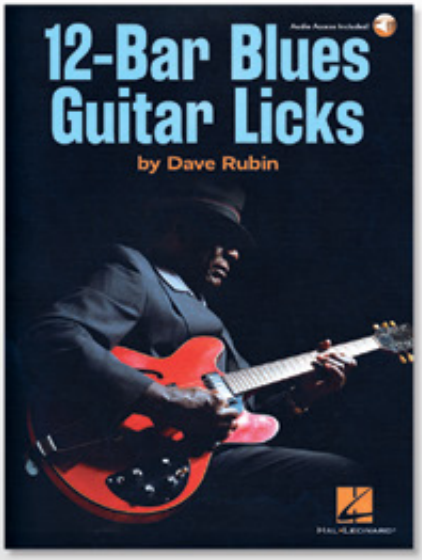


















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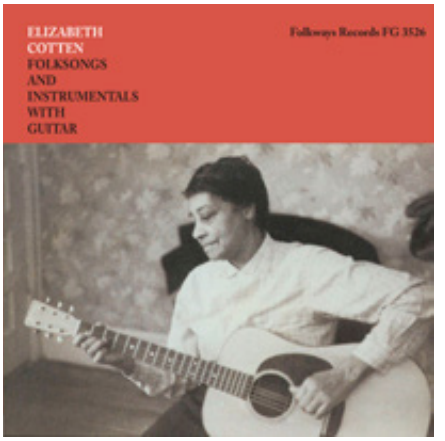

E7
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42

READERS' PICK

Shake Sugaree

A family collaboration yields an Elizabeth Cotten fingerpicking staple

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER



Had it not been for a chance encounter, the acoustic guitar world might have never known one of its most significant figures. Elizabeth Cotten learned the instrument when she was growing up in the early 1900s in North Carolina, but gave it up for church and family not long after she was married at 17. Some 40 years later, when she was working in a Washington, D.C., department store, Cotten helped a lost child find her mother, who turned out to be the modernist composer Ruth Crawford Seeger, spouse of fellow composer, musicologist, and folklorist Charles Seeger. The Seegers hired Cotten to work in their household, then discovered her musical gifts when she began playing one of their guitars—after not having picked up the instrument for decades.

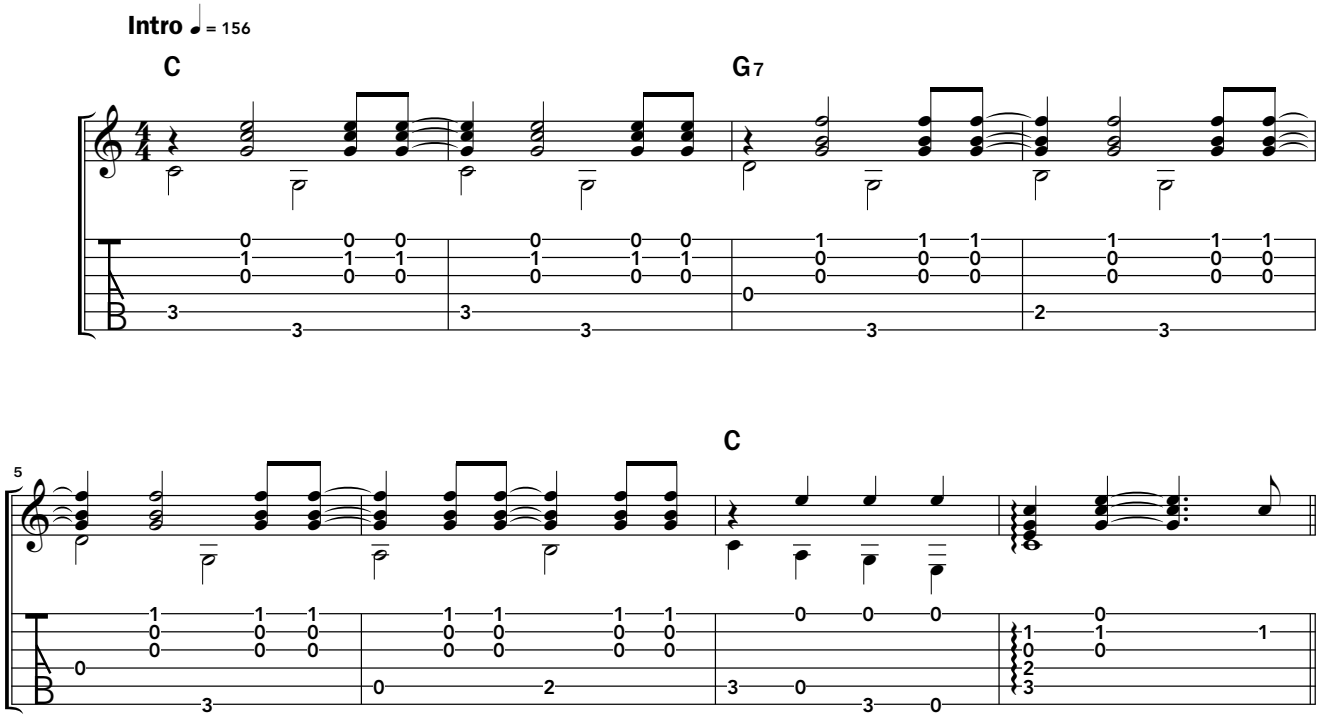
Sometime in the early 1950s, the Seegers' son Mike (whose stepbrother was Pete Seeger) began making home recordings of Cotten. He also produced her 1958 debut album, *Folksongs and Instrumentals with Guitar*, released when the musician was in her mid-60s, followed by *Shake Sugaree* (1967). The title track of the latter features Cotton's great-granddaughter Brenda Evans, then only 12, on vocals. Evans, with the help of her brother and cousins, wrote the song's nursery rhyme-like lyrics, as idiosyncratic as Cotten's guitar work.

As she does on her signature song, "Freight Train" (transcribed in the July 2017 issue), Cotten plays "Shake Sugaree" on a guitar tuned down a whole step, using chord shapes in the key of C major that sound in B♭. The transcription here captures Cotten's bright fingerpicking—an intro solo, followed by one full verse accompaniment—note for note. While the song is harmonically simple, not venturing from the I (C), IV (F), and V (G7) chords (sounding as B♭, E♭, and F7, respectively), there are lots of little details that add interest. Note, for instance, how Cotten varies the texture with a moving bass line on its own in the tenth bar, and with pinches between the bass and the open first string in measures 7, 12, and 31—concepts to keep in mind for creating dynamic accompaniments. AG

SHAKE SUGAREE

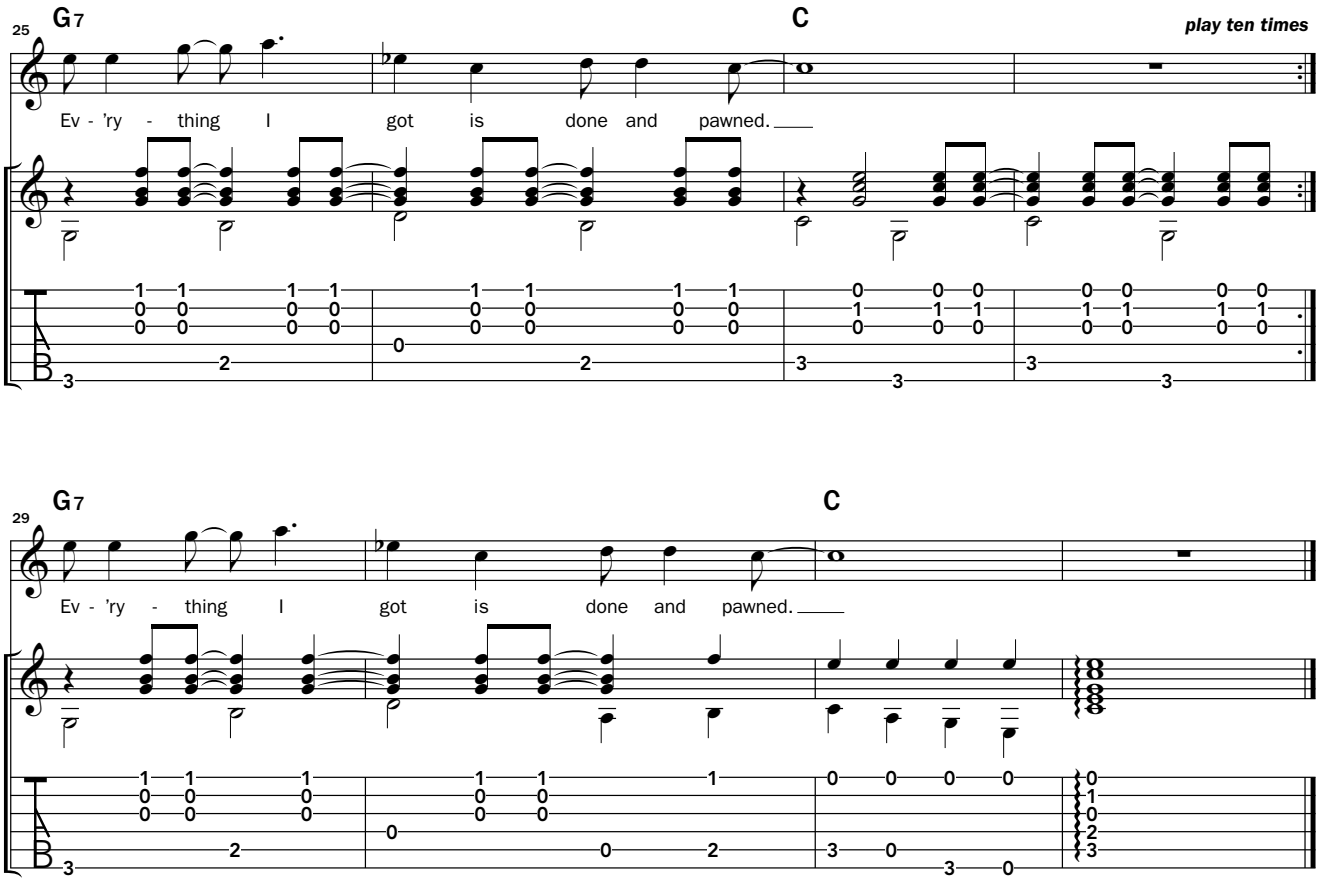
WORDS AND MUSIC BY ELIZABETH COTTEN

Tune down one whole step (D G C F A D)



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Verse
C
9
1. Have a lit - tle song, won't take long.
2. Pawn my watch, pawn my chain.
F
13
Sing it right, once or twice.
Pawn ev - 'ry - thing that was in my name.
Chorus
F
C/G
G7
17
Oh, Lord - y me, did - n't I shake su - gar - ee?
C
G7
C
21
Ev - 'ry - thing I got is done and pawned.



3. Pawn my buggy
 Horse and cart
 Pawned everything that was on my lot

4. Pawn my chair
 Pawn my bed
 Ain't got nowhere to lay my head

5. Pawn my tobacco
 Pawn my pipe
 Pawned everything that was in my sight

6. Have a little secret
 I ain't gonna tell
 I'm going to heaven in a brown pea shell

7. Pawn my farm
 Pawn my plough
 Pawned everything, even pawned my old cow

8. Pawn my hat
 Pawn my shoes
 Pawned everything that I could use

9. Have a little secret
 I ain't gonna tell
 I'm goin' to heaven and I ain't goin' no…

10. Chew my tobacco
 Spit my juice
 We raise Cain but it ain't a bit a use

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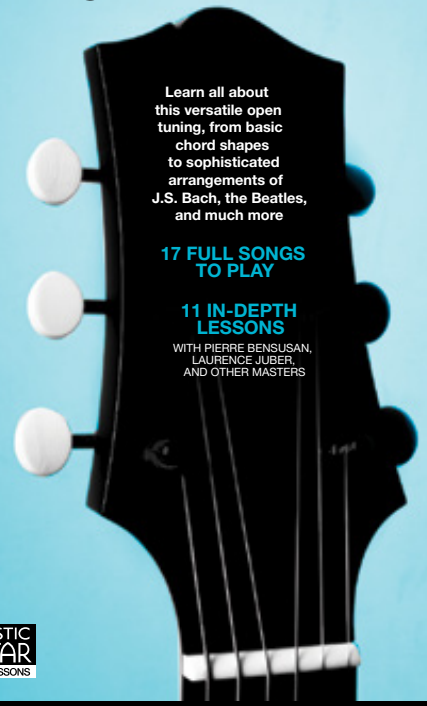
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WORLD PREMIERE

Double Southpaw

A study in position shifting, inspired by a legendary jazz drummer

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

Julian Lage has a list of potential song titles—he estimates there are easily more than a thousand of them—that he has been gathering for the last 15 years. One of those names, "'Double Southpaw,' recently found its music when the guitarist-composer recorded the composition as a duet with bassist Jorge Roeder for his latest album, *The Layers*. Lage says, "'Double Southpaw' was just a combination of two words that sounded funny enough, and it felt appropriate for a song with these quirky rhythmic and harmonic twists and turns."

This transcription of "Double Southpaw" comes from the album, a different version than the video on Lage's YouTube channel. The composition starts off in B major, the A section based on a I–♭II (B–Cmaj13) progression that calls to mind a common harmonic device in flamenco music, and the B section moves to the parallel key of B minor. The inspiration for the piece, though, wasn't so much the Spanish guitar tradition as the rhythmic sensibilities of jazz drummer Elvin Jones. "Even though there are no drums on it—that's the irony—the real sensibility that the piece speaks to is a particular tempo of Jones' swing feel, like on 'Mr. Syms,' from *Coltrane Plays the Blues*," Lage says. "It's slow, but it has forward motion and a really wide beat. The song is really just about celebrating that feel.

Julian Lage



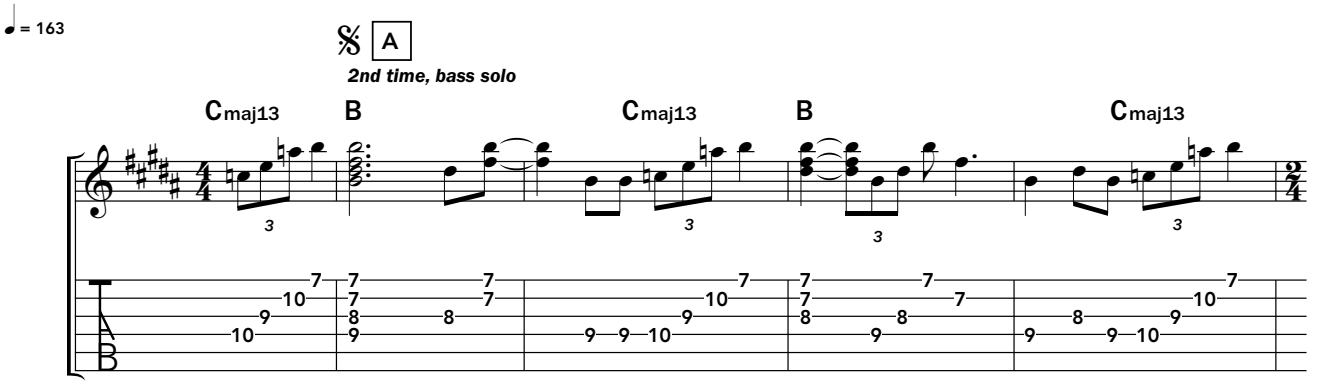
SHERVIN LAINEZ

I've learned so much from how Jorge effortlessly solos on it," he continues. "We only recently started doing the song live—and I'm still learning how to play it!"

Lage says that he also sees "Double Southpaw" as a study in shifting positions, as it moves all around the fretboard—from the seventh position in bar 5 to the first in the following measure, for instance. "Move the forearm and the hand will follow," Lage recommends. "That's the best way to change positions, versus reaching with your fingers from one position to another and then letting your arm catch up to you." AG

DOUBLE SOUTHPAW

BY JULIAN LAGE



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B
Am(add9)
G/B
C
Asus2
F♯
Bm
B♭
D5
D6/9
Dmaj7
Cmaj13
B
Cmaj13
B
Cmaj13
B
Am(add9)
G/B
C
Asus2
F♯add4
To Coda
Bm
B♭
D5
D6/9
Dmaj7
D9sus4


B
Bm
G/D
Em13
Gmaj7♯11
Bm
D
27
C
C7
E
E7
D6
Cmaj7
C♯7
Fmaj7♯11
Cmaj13
D.S. al Coda
33
Coda
D5
Dsus4
D7sus4
Bm
G/D
38
Em13
Gmaj7♯11
Bm
D
C
C7
43
E
E7
D6
Cmaj7
C♯7
F(♯4)
play three times
Cmaj13
B
48

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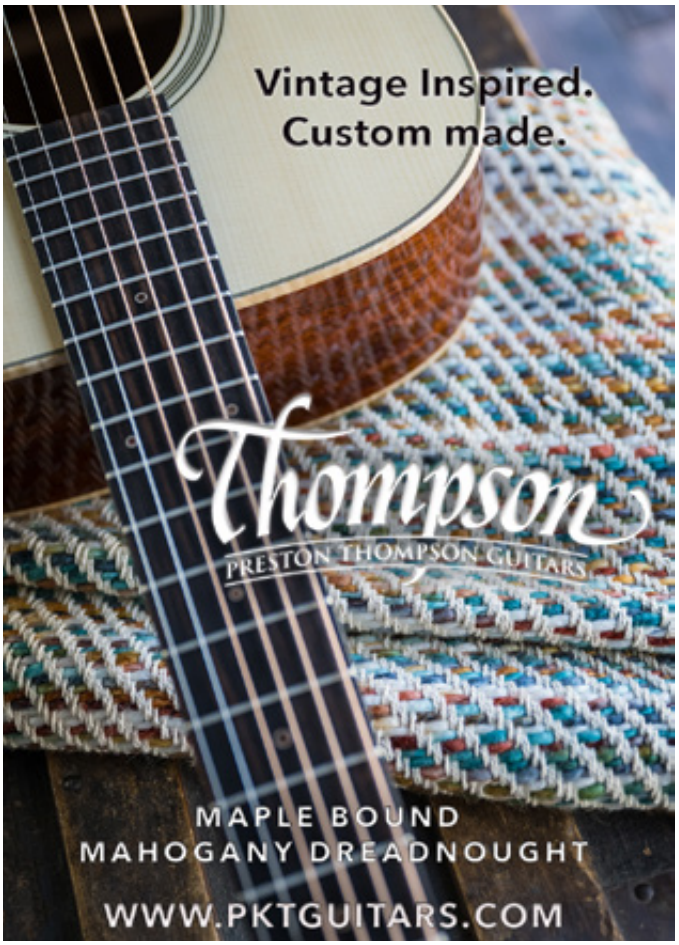


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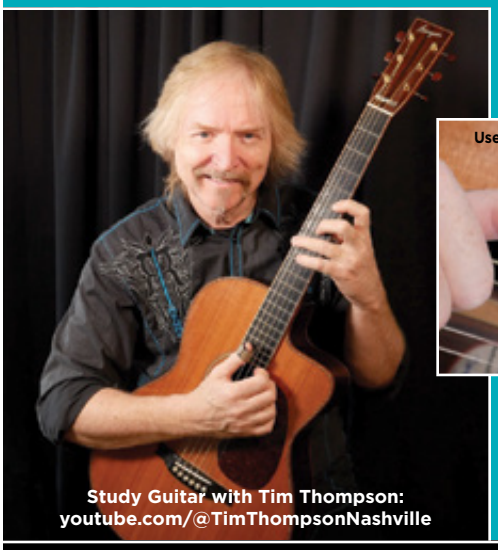
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MAKERS & SHAKERS

John Monteleone



ROD FRANKLIN

Portrait of an Artist

John Monteleone's exquisite archtops are seen in the hands of top players and museum display cases

BY EMILE MENASCHÉ

If there's a living heir to the great mid-20th-century luthiers like John D'Angelico and James D'Aquisto, John Monteleone would have to be it. Growing up on Long Island near New York City, Monteleone, now in his mid-70s, began building guitars with just his own observations and some rudimentary books to guide him. Thus began a journey that would see his instruments among the most prized in the world among players, collectors, and even the curators at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, where his Four Seasons guitars are on permanent exhibition.

Influenced by both guitar and mandolin designs and driven by his own understanding of tone, Monteleone is as much an artist as an artisan. His work builds on tradition without being beholden to it as he continues to evolve and challenge himself. As a result, his instruments aren't so much models as individual examples, each one bearing his fingerprints.

I spoke to Monteleone from his Long Island workshop as a new documentary about him called *The Chisels Are Calling* was about to make its way onto DVD. Shown on display, in progress, and in the hands of players like Julian Lage, Ben Harper, the late Woody Mann, and others, the film showcases Monteleone's approach to lutherie in which, as Mark Knopfler says, "Every piece of [the guitar] is a work of art."

The title of your documentary emphasizes the word chisels. Are you still building everything by hand?

I'm sort of an old-fashioned guy [*laughs*]. I build by hand mostly, and the machinery that I use is fairly simple and straightforward—nothing terribly exotic.

What made you decide to build a guitar in the first place?

In 1958 or '59, I was about ten when I first starting hearing guitars on the radio. I was already a piano student; I've been one of those all my life. But rock 'n' roll was on my list. I began to desire a few different kinds of guitars—Fenders and Gibson Les Pauls. There was this hit called "Sleepwalk" by Santo & Johnny. I looked at the album cover and saw that triple-neck steel guitar, and that would be the first project I tried to build—a copy of that guitar.

So you started with something easy—a triple neck?

Yeah. But I never finished it because I got distracted by other guitars. I wanted to have a Martin D-28, but it was too expensive, as was the D-18. So I would go to local music stores

looking for similar guitars so that I could try to memorize their forms and copy them. That became my mission. By the time I was 14, I started to build a mahogany dreadnought.

How did you learn? Were there books at the time?

Somewhere along the way, I found a drawing that I traced to make a template. One day my dad drove me into New York City, to H.L. Wild, where you could find wood to build instruments. I collected the materials to try and build this thing. The only book I could find was *How to Make a Spanish Guitar* by A.P. Sharpe, about classical, not steel-string, construction. But I understood the difference and would make up modifications along the way, starting with the form, the body outline, and then the bracing. I figured it out and copied the D-18 as best as I could. I still have that guitar today.

How long did it take you to complete it once you got the materials?

When I built that first guitar, I laid out the frets according to a formula that I got on the first day I bought my materials, on how to lay out the frets mathematically. I did that the best I could using the vernier measuring system to the nearest one thousandth of an inch. After I'd finished the whole thing, it always had this intonation problem. So I figured, "One day I'll try and fix this."

Meanwhile, a couple of years float by, and I'm already building another guitar, Number Two, so Number One never really gets the full attention that it should have. It sat around for about 50 years. I took off the neck because it needed a reset, and thought, "That neck was never really any good anyway." Finally, last year, I got the thing out and said, "Today is the day—I'm the guy who built this guitar! Why can't I build another neck for it?" And that's exactly what I did, in a bolt-on style. It came out beautifully, and for the first time, I was able to play that guitar in tune and enjoy what it really sounds like. It brought a tear to my eye.

So your first guitar was a mahogany dreadnought. What came next?

By 1965, I managed to buy a secondhand D-18, so I was able to access all the information I needed to make that second guitar, which was an Indian rosewood dreadnought. I built it on the kitchen table in my first apartment, and I still have that guitar, too.

Did you or others perform with your early guitars?

During my college years, I was playing quite a bit. Every week there seemed to be some kind of gig. I had a partner; we called ourselves John and John. My college was in Missouri, so we performed in that area, in Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas. We even made a demo that I had on tape that was sitting around for years. I recently digitized it, and I even put it on vinyl [*laughs*].

When did you decide that you wanted to build guitars for living?

After I got out of college, I was working for my father's pattern making business when I heard about Mandolin Brothers. [See a shop visit to the legendary New York store, which has since closed, in the May 2011 issue. —*ed.*] The owners were guests on a radio show. I called the next day and arranged a trip to go in there to see some mandolins. I told them [owners Stan Jay and Hap Kuffner] I had built some guitars and they said they would like to see them. Their business was just getting started at the time; they didn't have a repairperson, so they saw my work and offered me the job.

That was the very beginning of any idea of making a career of repairing instruments, let alone building them. Right off the bat, I was building replica [Gibson] Mastertone banjo necks, five-string necks, for converting tenors into fives. Along with that I was getting some Martins for neck resets, crack repairs, etc. Then the parade of instruments crossing my workbench just elevated. I got to see so many interesting, fascinating instruments. My university was right there on my workbench.

Was there an instrument that sent you in a new direction? Or was it more about compiling ideas and influences and putting them into the mixer?

I was beginning to see quite a variety of instruments, from good to bad and in between. So I was able to examine and evaluate them quite easily. Some beautiful specimens would come in. It wouldn't be unusual for me to see original Martin D-45s, OM-45s, OM-28s, and other 1930s instruments. Some wonderful Gibsons also came through that contributed to that educational experience. It was a serendipitous moment to gather all that input. I was also beginning to see some Lloyd Loar [signed] mandolins [those made by Gibson between 1922 and 1924] that I could examine quite easily, and I learned a lot from that.

When did you start building for others?

At the time, Loar mandolins were beginning to get so expensive that the average musician couldn't afford them, so I saw an opportunity to make replicas at a much more affordable price. Mandolin Brothers was my exclusive agent for these mandolins, which I called M-5s. They were notated on the interior as replicas, but I think the first eight even said Gibson on the headstock. Then I was testing the field out there, making some mandolins with my name, and they were accepted. From that point on, I never put Gibson on any of my instruments.

Did building mandolins influence your guitar designs?

Sure. It played a part in my understanding of tone, the tonal balances within the instrument itself. I have to go back to the first archtop guitar I ever saw, a D'Angelico New Yorker, when I was 12 years old. It was brand-new—the guy had just taken delivery of it. When he opened the case, the lacquer just wafted out of it to my face. It was unbelievable, a beautiful blonde cutaway.

That image stayed with me for many years until I was beginning to work on some D'Angelicos at Mandolin Brothers. That would play into my understanding about the tonality, balance, and response of these guitars—not only that, but also the potential uses of the archtop. I was beginning to have a broad mix of musicians come through my shop—jazzers as well as fingerstyle and bluegrass players—who were looking for more sensitive, user-friendly, adaptive, and tonally balanced instruments.

Can you elaborate on that?

By the 1980s, I was beginning to see a more intimate approach, with players gravitating toward early [Gibson] L-5s from the late '20s and early '30s. Those L-5s are smaller bodied, 16-inch, and were being used by some of my friends who were playing fingerstyle or open-tunings-style, Chet Atkins–style, or blues. They were looking for a more versatile instrument—not just a "chunk-chunk" or strumming type of guitar, an orchestral instrument.

At the same time, the conditions were changing for the professional musician—cabarets, Broadway, live gigs, and the recording industry—all of that was changing. And so starting in the late '80s, you began to see a real movement into a more intimate, solo style of home recording for guitarists.

How did these different factors influence your design philosophy?

A few different things come to mind. One is tradition. Back in the 1960s and '70s, musicians expected to see certain things in the way guitars and mandolins looked and sounded. The idea of an individual luthier coming on the scene was something new and yet to be proven. You were up against traditional values. For the individual luthier to challenge that, they would have to prove themselves.

The Four Seasons quartet of guitars



PHOTO © THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/ ROD FRANKLIN

I always understood that my instruments were going to have to sing for their supper, so there's been a real obligation to have them be fully functional, desirable, and inspiring instruments for musicians to play. I've always based my guitars on this very simple foundation on which I can build something that has individuality. As an independent luthier, I've never wanted to be repetitive and build the same instrument over and over.

So I began building some individual ideas thematically into my designs. The Four Seasons is a good example of that. That was a personal project I built for myself in my own time. The instruments were going to be inseparable. I thought of them in a choir-like way; I could hear their voices and hear them blend together as a quartet.

What is the first guitar that felt like a statement of your voice as a builder?

My Eclipse model was my first archtop design, a traditionally based guitar. Right after that, I started what I called the Radio Flyer, really my breakdown of this traditional expectation, followed by the Radio City. Those where the first two that really were my own artistic designs. [See another original Monteleone design, the Rocket Convertible, on page 74. —*ed.*]

Did you build them for specific players?

I built them for myself.

Were there any players that helped you to understand your instruments in a different way?

It's going to be a subjective idea to any player. But I was listening very carefully to good advice and evaluating and weighing that all the time, trying to understand what they were telling me. And I would learn from certain players, be they professional or amateur.

I pretty much understood that many of these players were after the same thing: an instrument that can deliver a highly balanced response, one that is quick off the fingers or pick. You should be able to play the guitar and drive it as hard as you want and it will still not break up—but you should also be able to touch the thing as softly as you want and have it sing. A very lyrical instrument is what I was after, especially in the trebles.

What do you mean by "balanced" in the case of an archtop?

A lot of instruments, if you go out of the midrange into the trebles and the basses, you begin to have more challenges. With an archtop guitar, I never want to hear that steel of the string; I want a very complete treble response that is very rich and pure, has good fundamental to every note, and a nice overtone structure. So as a result, I have these treble notes quite consistently that have a very rounded kind of sound—you can hear the wood of the instrument. And same going down to the basses, allowing them to have really deep resonance. So I build the instrument in that direction, through the way I brace it, with asymmetrical tone bars, and how this system works together with the bridge.

Do you have preferred materials?

I have a pretty steady diet of materials that I use—maples and spruces, both European and domestic. But I think the bottom line is for an independent luthier to be able to read the materials that are on your workbench, to be able to understand them to the point that you can extract every ounce of tone that you can pull out of them. That's what a luthier does.

Are you still creating new templates?

The ideas continue, and they come easily, but bringing them to fruition is really the difficult part. I just designed a smaller body that is 15-3/4 inches, just under the 16 that I normally do. I will design something new if I see the need for it, and if a particular client is asking me to do it, I will investigate it. I'll make sketches, drawings, and templates. But ultimately, I like to get the material out there on my workbench and let it tell me where it wants to go. I'm listening to the material. There's a constant flow of decisions being made as you're building. That process never stops. **AG**



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The Laws of Guitar Physics

What science says about guitar tuners' impact on tone

BY MARTIN KEITH

Q: I enjoyed a recent column in which you mentioned how headstock repairs can affect guitar tone. Internet forums abound with anecdotes of swapping out heavy tuners with lighter machines to improve the tone on certain guitars. Is there any truth in that? Having a PhD in physics, I also appreciated the physics flavor sprinkled throughout the article. I spend a lot of time thinking about why different guitars have different sounds. In theory it seems that one could predict the tonal properties of an acoustic guitar just by knowing all of the material properties and details of construction. But in practice I have learned that there is as least as much art involved as there is science. It's fascinating to me!

—Stephen Johnson

A: Thanks for the kind words. Without question, the physics of stringed instruments is an intriguing and complex field, full of highly interactive variables and entirely subjective evaluations. People can spend—and have spent—whole lifetimes attempting to orient themselves on why instruments work the way they do, and how to predict or control the results in advance. Before we look at your specific question, I'd like to suggest a few rabbit holes for anyone willing to jump into the world of physics-based instrument building and evaluation.

The modern approach to scientific study of instrument behavior began primarily in the world of violins, with the incredibly influential work of Carleen Hutchins and Norman Pickering. From there, violin analysts such as George Stoppani have carried the torch forward, developing high-tech analytical tools using custom-written software, accelerometers, and laser holographic imaging to visualize plate behavior. Guitar luthier Alan Carruth was one of the primary bridges between the violin and guitar fields, and continues to be at the forefront of research on guitar performance.

Another important school of guitar research originated in Australia. Luthiers Graham Caldersmith and Trevor Gore brought new levels of rigor and scientific method to their building approach and published quite a few papers documenting their results both empirically and mathematically.

Finally, in the United States, a number of builders have begun using FFT (Fast Fourier Transform) software to evaluate and tune their instruments, both during and after construction. Specialized equipment such as the LucchiMeter is used to measure transmission speed of vibration through materials, allowing wood suppliers to sort wood according to sonic performance as well as mechanical and aesthetic properties.

Although many of these techniques have begun to show real results, I think it is important to mention that the gold standard of tone and performance for many makers remains the vintage guitars of the 1930s and '40s, all

It's easy to experiment with adding mass to the headstock by attaching a C-clamp.



BILL EVANS



Martin Keith

GOT A QUESTION?

Uncertain about guitar care and maintenance? The ins-and-outs of guitar building? Or another topic related to your gear? Ask *Acoustic Guitar*'s repair expert Martin Keith by sending an email titled "Repair Expert" to Editors.AG@stringletter.com and we'll forward it to Keith.



If your question is selected for publication, you'll receive a complimentary copy of *AG*'s *Acoustic Guitar Owner's Manual.*

built long before such scientific methods were developed. Instrument tone is inherently a subjective and constantly moving target, and analytical tools can only tell us so much, just as no scientific evaluation of a painting can accurately measure its emotional impact on the viewer.

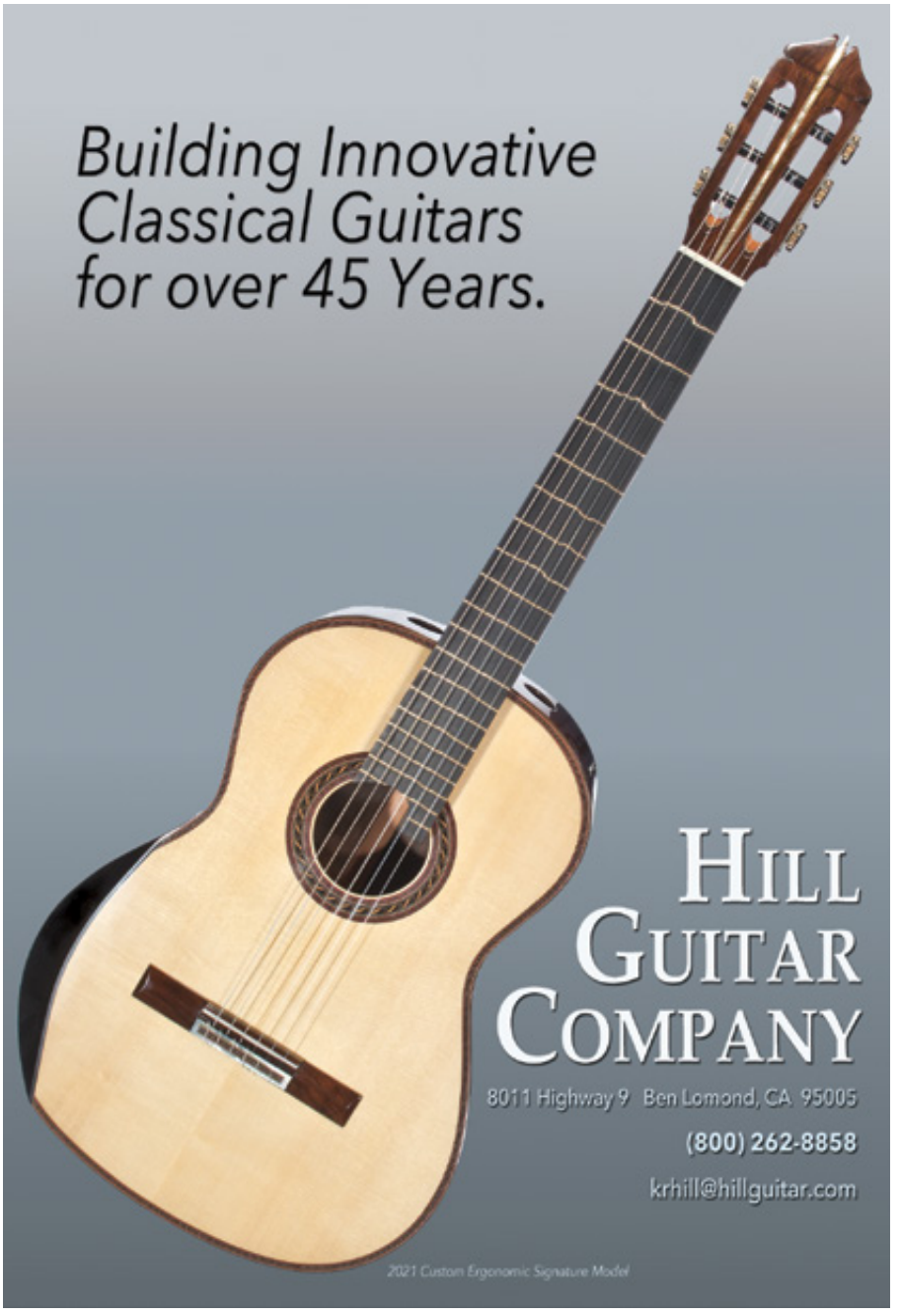
Moving on to your specific question: changing the weight of tuning machines can absolutely affect the tone of the guitar, and I have encountered this quite a few times in my repair work. The neck and headpiece are quite a bit more flexible than many guitarists realize, and I will sometimes shock my clients by clamping the body in a vise and showing them just how easily the neck will flex with gentle hand pressure. On some guitars, it's possible to yank on a single string and watch the others rise up higher above the fretboard as the whole neck bends forward.

Every guitar must be considered in its entirety as a physical system, and different makers have different priorities and preferences in their work.

This flexibility is one of the main culprits in subtracting energy from the vibrating string. The neck/headpiece system oscillates when excited by the string, and the rate of that oscillation will be affected by both the stiffness and weight of the neck. Loading the end of this oscillator is a particularly direct way to control its rate. Heavier tuners will slow the rate, which has two effects—it can contribute to sustain by adding inertia, but it can also potentially push the neck's oscillation down into the musical range of the guitar. When this happens, some notes can sound weak or even dead, as the guitar will lose energy to the neck much more quickly at those specific frequencies. It's quite easy to experiment with adding mass to the headpiece to gauge its effect—a simple C-clamp will do (padded, of course!), or one of the commercially available aftermarket products such as the Fatfinger sustain enhancer. For particularly flexible necks, these products can sometimes be helpful in shifting the problematic frequencies to a less problematic range.

Lighter tuning machines, by contrast, will provide less inertia, which raises the native frequency of the neck/headpiece system. This is why some players perceive an improved tone after switching to lighter machines. The dead spots often shift higher into a range that does not compete with commonly played notes. It accomplishes a similar effect to making the neck more rigid, but much less invasively. Lighter tuners also noticeably improve the balance of an acoustic guitar, reducing "neck dive" and overall weight.

Every guitar must be considered in its entirety as a physical system, and different makers have different priorities and preferences in their work. The late Rick Turner often expressed a preference for heavier, more rigid necks in his instruments, while other builders, such as Ken Parker, have engineered brilliant systems to build necks that are both lighter and stiffer than the traditional solid mahogany and maple. Both approaches have their adherents—and both can yield remarkable instruments. AG



Gibson J-45 50s Faded and Keb' Mo' "3.0" 12-Fret J-45

Two new—and decidedly different—takes on the classic workhorse

BY JAMES VOLPE ROTONDI

Perhaps it's that focused midrange punch and those thick low-mids. Along with a tamed treble side and even response across the strings, the Gibson J-45, that workhorse of a guitar, sits great in almost any mix and won't step on the EQ turf typically reserved for vocals, keys, or bass. Vintage J-45s are legendary for delivering that velvety-to-barking blues and classic Americana core tone in the studio—that almost pre-compressed, "sounds like vinyl" timbre. It's an enduring and well-loved sound.

What makes Gibson's two latest J-45 models—the J-45 50s Faded and the Keb' Mo' "3.0" 12-fret J-45—interesting is the way they both stick to the strengths and depart from the script in terms of our preconceived ideas about the J-45 shape. Contrasting them may even offer insights into what the model's hand-scalloped X-braced design and round-shouldered curves are capable of conjuring.

J-45 50s FADED

As vintage J-45s continue to skyrocket in value, Gibson fills the demand with new models like the 50s Faded, which loses the usual glossy nitrocellulose lacquer finish in favor of the satin that is so popular these days. This finish capably evokes the sexy matte appeal of a nicely weathered vintage J-45, especially with this compelling reddish sunburst, along with that rad '50s pickguard. The J-45 50s Faded is one serious looker.

For those seeking a traditional J-45, the new iteration deviates little from the scriptures. Slope-shoulder dreadnought shape, solid spruce top with traditional hand-scalloped X-bracing, mahogany back and sides, 24.75-inch scale length rosewood fretboard—it's all there. As for the sound, the review model capably delivers the key J-45 characteristics, as well. The tone is noticeably mellow, with a rich contained bark when you whack it, and some very pleasing velvety detail when played fingerstyle.

It's easy to get your body around this comfortable guitar, and the rounded neck, while not especially slender, allows for a vintage style of playability, with a stout but familiar feel in your palm. In short, it's a fairly textbook J-45, well executed, as one increasingly expects from the revitalized and energetic Gibson of the last half-decade.

Keep this in mind, though: While the included L.R. Baggs VTC pickup system can make up for the 50s Faded's somewhat limited tonal focus through a good acoustic amp, the guitar is not, as expected, especially dynamic, colorful, or loud on its own. It's a close-quarters instrument, great on a mic, or in the hands of a songwriter as part of a live band, but it's not exactly a room-filler.

KEB' MO' "3.0"

Right on cue, the Keb' Mo' "3.0" 12-Fret J-45 shows up to upend all these notions of the colors you can coax from a J-45. Honestly, this guitar—the third signature Keb' Mo' ax, following the Grammy-winning bluesman's two popular L-00 models—is a real revelation.

Though its body shape is certainly slope/round-shouldered, it's a bit narrower and leaner; it actually suggests a J-35, with its Advanced Jumbo dreadnought profile, which predates the later, more popular J shape. Unlike classic J-45s, it has no pickguard at all, which accentuates its sultry curves and the aesthetics of its thermally aged Sitka spruce top and mahogany back and sides. The open-back Grover tuners are a classy, cool touch, as well.

But the guitar's most notable feature is its 12th-fret neck joint. The bridge on a 12-fret guitar typically sits a bit further away from the internal bracing than on a 14-fretter, making the bridge's vibrations through the body more pronounced, for more volume, but arguably leading to slightly less sustain, given that the bridge has slightly less rigidity by being further from the bracing. That theory plays out pretty accurately with the Keb' Mo', which displays an almost D-28 kind of volume, frequency range, and projection—all very unlike a typical J-45—maybe without quite as much sustain.

That said, the Keb' Mo' has richer lows, and more golden, coppery highs than any J-45 I've encountered. To play it for five minutes is a treat; to play it for an hour is to break new ground in your playing. It is a wildly expressive guitar. Play it with the flesh of your picking-hand fingers and easily coax that classic, moody, and dark J-45 vibe.

But play it with fingerpicks or a flatpick, and my goodness, there's just loads of piano-like bass, manicured mids, and pleasing highs; in other words, a fabulously dynamic, expressive range, which one could easily argue merits the "workhorse" nickname more than a conventional J-45. The Keb' Mo' will likely sound good on literally *everything*—blues, folk, bluegrass, pop, British Isles, Americana, you name it.

The Keb' Mo' also boasts a longer scale length (25 inches) and slightly wider nut (1.805 inches)—a big plus for fingerstyle players. I suspect that even guitarists used to the 1.725-inch nut width on most J-45s may well find themselves a bit addicted to the feel of the Keb' Mo' fretboard. And while the 12th-fret joint means you lose some playable territory in the higher positions, there's a huge gain in connecting physically to the parts of the neck you're going to use most often.

Touring players are going to love this thing: comfortable, super cool–looking, and fairly rugged, the sonic image of the Keb' Mo' is capably and faithfully rendered by the L.R. Baggs VTC pickup that comes standard, should you choose to amplify, and it's hard to imagine a reason to swap it out. Sure, this guitar is fairly expensive, but it's well worth the price.

THE WRAP

These two new J-45 offerings ably demonstrate that the J-45 foundation is alive and well. While the 50s Faded J-45 will speak to those looking for the tried-and-true tones that made the model famous, the Keb' Mo' "3.0" 12-Fret J-45 will inspire those artists looking for a rich character and timbre that is both highly expressive and perhaps even more all-purpose. Which is the right workhorse for you? It all depends on what beast you want in your stable, and what you've got to trade for that horse. AG



KEB' MO' "3.0" 12-FRET J-45

BODY 12-fret slope-shoulder dreadnought; thermally aged Sitka spruce top with traditional hand-scalloped X-bracing; multi-ply top binding; single-ply back binding; rosewood bridge; gloss nitrocellulose lacquer finish

NECK Mahogany; 25" scale length; 1.805" bone nut; rosewood fretboard; 12-inch radius; 19 frets; mother-of-pearl dot inlays; single-ply binding; compound dovetail neck-to-body joint with hot hide glue construction; open-back Grover tuners

OTHER L.R. Baggs VTC electronics; Gibson Coated Phosphor Bronze strings (.012–.053); hardshell case

MADE IN USA

PRICE $4,299

50s FADED J-45

BODY 14-fret slope-shoulder dreadnought; Sitka spruce top with traditional hand-scalloped X-bracing; mahogany back and sides; multi-ply top binding; rosewood bridge; satin nitrocellulose lacquer finish

NECK Mahogany; 24.75" scale length; 1.725" bone nut; rosewood fretboard; 12-inch radius; 20 frets; mother-of-pearl dot inlays; compound dovetail neck-to-body joint with hot hide glue construction; Gotoh tuners

OTHER L.R. Baggs VTC electronics; Gibson Coated Phosphor Bronze strings (.012–.053); hardshell case

MADE IN USA

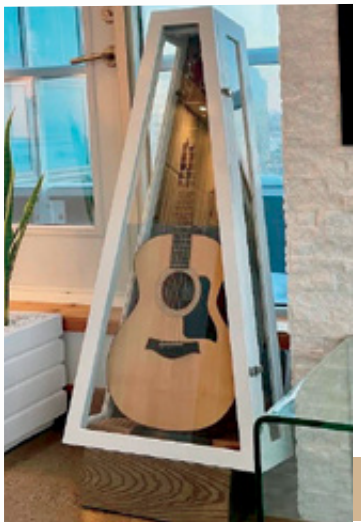
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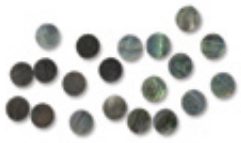
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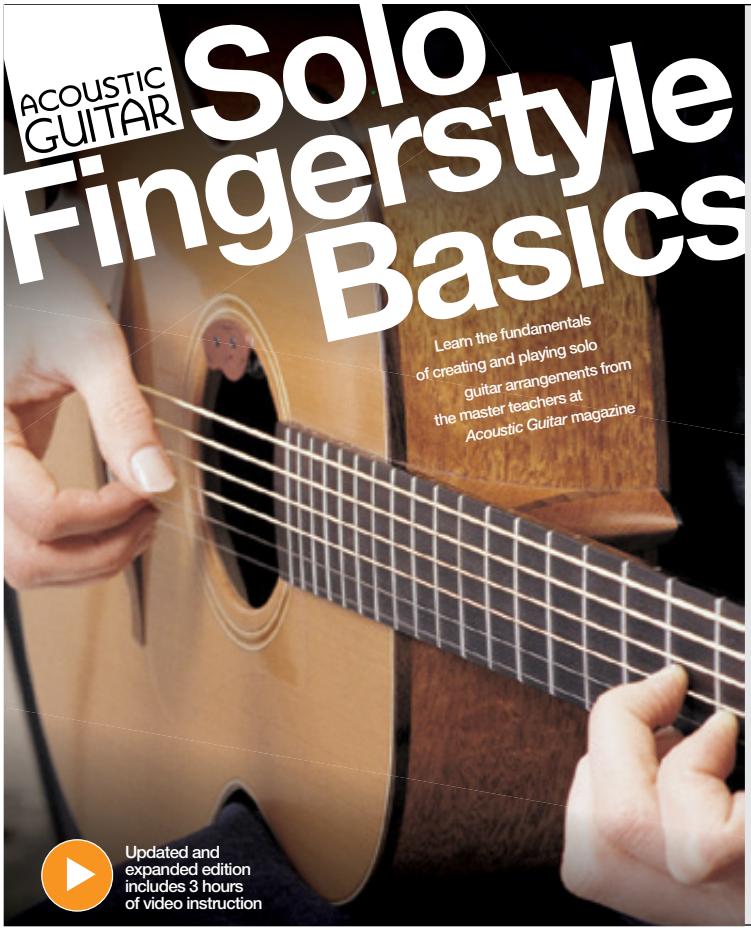


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FLI RECORDS/BUDDE MUSIC

Various Artists, *I Am a Pilgrim: Doc Watson at 100* (FLi Records/Budde Music)

Mixing Tradition and Innovation

Powerful Doc Watson tribute surprises with unexpected cast of players

BY KENNY BERKOWITZ

By the time he died, Arthel Lane "Doc" Watson (1923–2012) and his music had traveled all around the world, farther than anyone in the guitarist's hometown of Stony Fork, North Carolina, could have imagined. Along the way, Watson influenced more people than you and I can count, enough to fill a thousand tribute albums and still have room for more.

That left plenty of space for Mitch Greenhill, Watson's former manager, to hand select the lineup for *I Am a Pilgrim*—a star-studded new record celebrating the life and legacy of Watson, who would have turned 100 on March 3 of this year—starting with his choice of producer: Matthew Stevens, a Berklee-educated, Manhattan-based jazz guitarist who's recorded with modern jazz bassists Esperanza Spalding and Ben Williams. Stevens is the first clue this is going to be an unconventional homage, and from there, all it takes is a short subway ride to fill the album's 15 tracks, with some choices unlikelier than others.

At the furthest edge, there's Ariel Posen, who launches into a solo electric take on "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" with a blast of slide guitar that's heavy on tremolo and light on what people used to call folk purity. (For the record, Watson didn't even own an acoustic guitar when he was discovered by the Smithsonian's Ralph Rinzler.) Posen is followed by Marc Ribot (guitars) and Eszter Balint (fiddle) on "The Lost Soul," a rough, discordant take on the grimmest note in Watson's catalog, covered in a version that sounds like Kurt Weill crossed with Gaither Carlton. Equally unlikely, West African jazz guitarist Lionel Loueke double-tracks himself on electric guitar, playing a fuzz-toned rhythm at the bottom of the neck and a crisp, bright lead at the top, calling on the spirit of thumb piano to bridge Benin and Stony Fork.

Toward the middle of the spectrum, there's Bill Frisell, who unspools a lovingly haunted "Your Lone Journey," written following the death of Watson's son (and occasional musical partner), Merle Watson, before returning with Valerie June on "Handsome Molly," a duet where clawhammer banjo and Fender Telecaster move sweetly in and out of sync. Guitarist Michael Daves appears twice too, once as Steve Earle's fleet-fingered partner on "Make Me a Pallet" and once with Dolly Parton, where Daves dances around the melody on "The Last Thing on My Mind," a song Parton and Watson performed at Merlefest in 2001.

Watson influenced enough people to fill a thousand tribute albums.

At the near end, there's Jerry Douglas' wistful "Shady Grove," which perfectly captures the push-pull of loving and losing, of wanting to leave home and wanting to come back; it's the song Watson used to court his wife, Rosa Lee, and it's performed here with an astonishing depth of feeling. Yasmin Williams begins "Doc's Guitar" straightforwardly enough, hewing close to the original (transcribed on page 50) before transforming it with an intricate, playfully syncopated combination of two-handed tapping and percussive effects.

Finally, in the album's most conventional choices, Jack Lawrence relives the years he and Watson traveled together on "Florida Blues," playing the Martin D-18 Watson used to record his solo debut, and Chris Eldridge finds the heartless heart of the murder ballad "Little Sadie," with a solo that's equal parts untroubled and unsettling. In any other tribute, these two flatpickers would have been the center, Watson's truest inheritors—but on *I Am a Pilgrim*, they're just one piece of the picture, reminding us how deeply Watson loved all kinds of music, channeling everything he heard into a singular balance of tradition and innovation. AG

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Monteleone Rocket Convertible

A Blue Guitar that opens doors

BY GREG OLWELL



COURTESY OF THE ARCHTOP FOUNDATION

"This was a very important guitar to me," luthier John Monteleone said about his stunning Rocket Convertible in an interview with the Archtop Foundation, which now owns this instrument as part of the Blue Guitar Collection: 21 archtop guitars built for the late collector Scott Chinery, whose epic assemblage of over 1,000 guitars was documented in the book *The Chinery Collection: 150 Years of American Guitars*.

The Blue Guitars were inspired as a tribute to luthier Jimmy D'Aquisto, who built Chinery one of his modernist Centura Deluxe guitars using a distinctive blue hue. Chinery gave Monteleone and the other makers two conditions for the commission: the guitars had to be 18 inches wide and use the same stain D'Aquisto used—Mohawk Ultra Penetrating Stain #520-4146. Besides that, the makers were free to follow their muse, and this guitar resulted from Monteleone's vision and craft.

With the top's elliptical soundhole and the top side's dual soundports, the Rocket Convertible incorporates two concepts Monteleone was experimenting with to show that archtop guitars are suitable for intimate styles, such as fingerstyle, while also giving the player more control over what they hear. Side soundports were still a new and novel idea to let players hear more of what listeners hear in front of the instrument. So Monteleone applied his own creative twist with the Rocket Convertible. Both oval side openings have sliding metal doors so players can "open up" the guitar like a convertible to better hear themselves. Likewise, the front soundhole also includes a sliding panel to increase or reduce forward projection. He calls this the Rocket, and it's operated by a pull-out knob near the neck joint.

The rest of the guitar is made from traditional materials like highly figured maple for the neck, back, and sides and tight-grained spruce for the top. It also has ebony fittings and ivory inlays repurposed from an old Steinway piano.

Like most guitars from the Blue Guitar Collection, its blue color has changed in the 27 years since it was made. Variations in each maker's finishing process and in each batch of stain resulted in the green and blue shades seen here. Check out theblueguitars.com for more on this guitar and the others in the collection. AG

Acoustic Guitar (ISSN – 1049-9261, USPS - 5581) is published bi-monthly by String Letter Publishing, Inc., 330 Sir Francis Drake Blvd., Suite K, San Anselmo, CA 94960. Periodical postage paid at Richmond, CA 94804 and additional mailing offices. Printed in USA. Canada Post: Publications mail Agreement #40612608. Canada Returns to be sent to Imex Global Solutions, PO Box 32229, Hartford, CT 06150-2229. POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to *Acoustic Guitar*, String Letter Publishing, Inc., PO Box 91149, Long Beach, CA 90809-1149.

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